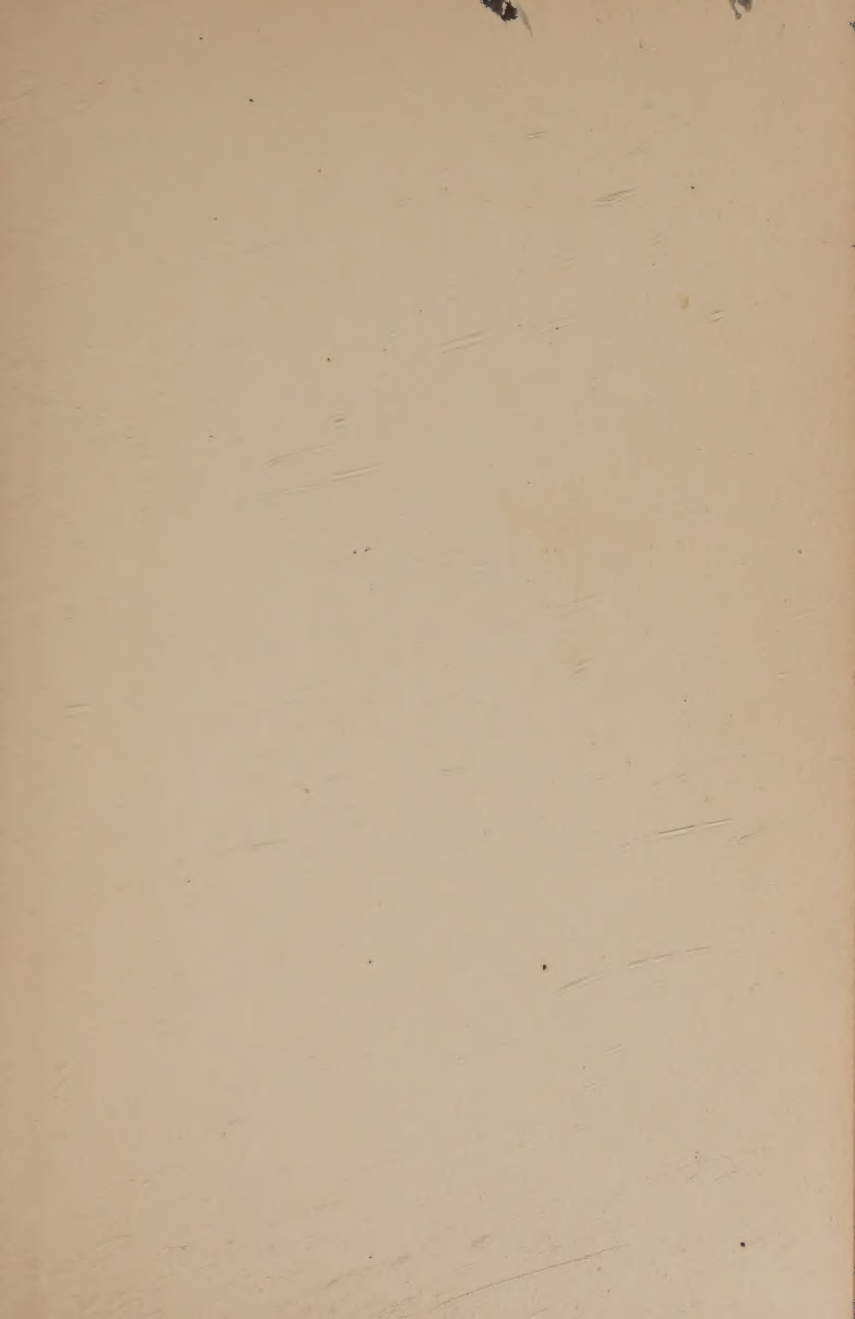


THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA



ELIZABETH JORDAN





The DEVIL *and*
THE DEEP SEA

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MISS NOBODY FROM NOWHERE



The DEVIL *and* THE DEEP SEA

A novel by

ELIZABETH JORDAN



THE CENTURY CO.

NEW YORK & LONDON

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THE EXTENSION MAGAZINE

First printing

TO

C. M. L.

FOR MANY YEARS MY FAITHFUL FRIEND
AND SECRETARY

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THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

CHAPTER I

A HOUSE OF MOURNING

NICHOLAS LONG returned the subdued greeting of Miss Catherine Chandler's butler, gave the man his hat and overcoat, rubbed his hands—for the November day was cold—and glanced expectantly toward the dining-room at the rear of the wide hall.

"Is any one in there, Johnson?" he asked.

"No, sir." Johnson was already leading the way along the hall, with the air of a man who knew and loved his duty. He escorted the new-comer into the comfortable room, where logs were blazing in a huge fireplace, drew a chair close to the fender, and then busied himself at the sideboard.

Long did not take the chair. He stood by the fire with his face turned toward the servant, and uttered a warning "That's enough, thanks," when a small drink had been poured from the old-fashioned decanter into a waiting glass. Johnson added soda from a round-bottomed bottle, put the glass on a tray, and sedately brought it across to the waiting figure.

Long took a drink, with a wishful eye on the empty chair. He was an ease-loving man and that chair eloquently called to him; but a combined sense of de-

corum and drama suggested that it was not seemly to be too much at ease in this house of mourning.

"You know how to make a man comfortable, Johnson," he said; and added as the butler obviously lingered, "If Stevens hadn't been with me so long I'd offer you a job, now that Miss Chandler is gone."

"I'd like nothing better, sir," Johnson respectfully assured him. "If I was thinking of a job, that is. You've been coming here so many years and so regular that I know your ways. And there's no gentleman I'd rather serve, if I may say so."

"But you're not looking for another place?"

"No, sir. That is—" Johnson cast a quick glance at the other's face and decided that he could go ahead—"Miss Chandler was good enough to tell me before she died that she had made some provision for me." He stopped, watching the lawyer's expression. No one knew better than Johnson the vagaries and eccentricities of the late Catherine Chandler, and the uncertainties of her conduct. "She did not go into details," he added as the hearer made no comment, "but I gathered that she had left me enough to start a little business, added to what I've saved. I hope she has, sir, for I must say I'm a bit tired of service."

Long nodded sympathetically. Johnson had reason for his weariness. Probably no other man would have tolerated for more than twenty years the tyranny and exactions of the imperious spinster who had lived alone with her servants and had driven those servants with such a heavy hand.

"I think you won't be disappointed," the lawyer permitted himself to remark, and Johnson exhaled the breath he had been holding. "The funeral is at eleven, I understand," Long went on, setting the empty glass on the mantel and glancing at his watch. "It's just half-past ten. I'll go upstairs and freshen a bit. The same room, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. You're not stopping over?"

"No. I'm motoring back to Waterford about half-past four. That will allow plenty of time to read the will to the family after luncheon. They're all here, of course."

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Price and her two daughters came out from Waterford as soon as Miss Chandler died, and they've been back and forth ever since. So has Miss Sabin. Mr. Hutchins and Mr. and Miss Dixon didn't get here till this morning. Mrs. Price was quite worked up because no one had been told Miss Chandler was so near the end," Johnson went on. "I'd have been glad enough to have some one here to share the responsibility, but Miss Chandler's orders were strict. Once before, when she had a bad turn, we sent for the family, and she laid us out for it good and proper. And of course her death was unexpected, in a way."

Long rested an elbow on the mantel and stared into the fire. He was a fine type of family lawyer as he stood there—tall, slender, dignified, erect, admirably dressed. He was fifty-eight, but he looked fully ten years younger. His dark hair was graying only at the temples, and his smooth-shaven, benign face and smil-

ing mouth had a surprising look of youth, sharply contradicted at times by a glance from his gray eyes that was like a blade-thrust. Johnson had never seen that look. There had been nothing in the association of the two men to bring it out. Knowing the visitor had forgotten him, the butler let his eyes rest on the lawyer's thoughtful face. Here was a man, Johnson admiringly reflected, who looked and acted to perfection his rôle in life. It was an ability which Johnson respected more than any other. He had no interest in misers in their garrets, in rich women who dressed badly, in young girls who were not pretty and popular—in any one, in short, who did not play well the part fate had assigned to him or her. Johnson played his own lowly rôle after the manner of the highest type he knew, that of a super English butler under whom he had worked as footman before he entered Miss Chandler's service. There had been hardly a day of his life, since then, when he had not recalled and acted upon some example or precept of this great model.

"She did die rather suddenly at the end," the lawyer now said, musingly.

"Yes, sir, we were all surprised. I understood the last specialists had given her another year or so."

Long nodded.

"But she seemed to know," Johnson went on. "She had the air of getting ready, if I may say so. She stopped seeing visitors after you were here last, three months ago. She only saw the family and the nurses and the brokers, Mr. Jackson and Mr. White, and

their clerk. They came very often, and she seemed to be attending to a great deal of business. And lately there was one strange gentleman."

Long, who had turned to leave the room, stopped at that. "One stranger? What stranger?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm not even sure of his name. I think it was Sloan. Dark, he was, and clean-shaven and middle-aged. Nice spoken, too, and quite the professional gentleman. But not with your way, sir; more abrupt like."

"When was he here?"

"Last week . . . yes, Friday of last week it was . . . five . . . no, four days before Miss Chandler died. He came just after lunch, and waited in the library while I took a sealed letter up to Miss Chandler," Johnson willingly continued, observing the other's interest. "He told me he'd been telephoned for and was expected. Miss Chandler had him come up, and she sent Miss Webb out of the room, as she always did. You know she never had more than one person at a time in the room with her. Just one of her queer notions, I suppose. Her business talks with you and Mr. Jackson and Mr. White were always private, and sometimes they were very long. So I wasn't surprised when this gentleman stayed two hours. Then he left, and that's the last I've seen of him."

"Was he met at the station?"

"No, sir. He came in a motor. But Miss Chandler's maid, Nora, told me—"

"Never mind that." Johnson, lost in the interest

of his theme, had forgotten himself, but Long now recalled the dignity of his position. It was one thing to be on friendly terms with Johnson, after years of social and professional visits to the house, and quite another to gossip with the butler about the private affairs of its late mistress. Nor would Johnson, Long knew, have dropped so far below his own ideals save for that taking way of Long's to which he had offered homage. The lawyer smiled at him.

"I've got just time to freshen a bit," he repeated as he crossed the threshold.

But he did not immediately go to his room. He passed the broad central staircase of the house and went on to a door at the right of the main entrance. Instinct had told him that he would find the dead woman beyond that door, and instinct was right. The room was big and cold and dim and flower-filled. It had the effect of a mortuary chapel, and the expression of its occupant, lying on her side in a massive coffin whose sinister outline was hidden with a blanket of red roses, suggested that she did not approve of her environment. Catherine Chandler, with all her faults, had simple and correct taste. She avoided display. This room had been decorated by a hired specialist, and showed it.

Long stood looking down at the dark face of his friend—for she had been his friend, and his best one—noting the sardonic twist of the haughty lips and wondering what final episode or reflection in the sick-room had left it there. He and Johnson were, so far

as he knew, the only men who in late years had really liked and admired Catherine Chandler; though both had lived through intervals when they neither liked nor admired her. To them she had still shown at sixty flashes of the fire and brilliance she was known to have possessed in her hot youth. She had hosts of acquaintances but no close friends; and he had good reason to believe that most of her servants had disliked her.

As to her nurses, it had been hard to persuade good ones to remain with her during her illness. He recalled now the strained look around the mouth of Miss Webb, the day-nurse he had seen in the sick-room during his final professional visits. Neither Miss Webb nor the night-nurse—a Miss Connolly—had been there more than six months. Poor Catherine had made things terribly hard for them, for herself, for everybody. Now, of all her household and her old circle, which had once been large and gay, there was no one who mourned her—no one, that is, save Johnson and himself.

Yet Johnson, he knew, was making optimistic plans for that new business, while Nicholas Long, in these last minutes with his friend, had merely pulled out a drawer of dusty memories and was critically turning over its contents. He would attend the funeral with decorum. He would eat a hearty luncheon after that funeral. (Johnson and the cook could be trusted to see that the luncheon *was* good.) He would read the will to the waiting, eager heirs, and then he would go back to town and try to forget Catherine. He would

miss her, of course. A thirty-year habit of close association is not easy to break. He would miss his runs out to dinner, his week-end visits with her. Catherine had never bored him. . . .

As to the reading of the will, that task would be without strain. No one would be disappointed. The unloved sister and nieces and nephews of his client were getting as much as they could expect, and rather more.

"Let them have it," she said wearily, in her final business talk with him, three months before her death. "When I sent for you I had about decided to change the will, but now I won't. After all, they're the children of my four sisters, and they came naturally by their spendthrift habits. I was always the only one in the family with any brains or judgment. Jane and Carrie and Anne all married scoundrels who broke their hearts and squandered their fortunes, and Mary's marriage to Horace Hutchins was just as unfortunate in a different way. He buried her in the country and buried himself in his laboratory, and let her die of neglect when she fell ill.

"When Jane and Carrie were killed in that motor accident a few years ago," she continued thoughtfully, "I wondered at the time, and I've often wondered since, if the thing wasn't intentional. They were both so damnably unhappy. Jane was at the wheel, and it wasn't like them to go off alone together. Harry Sabin's disgrace had just about finished Jane, anyway, and she lived in hourly terror that he'd escape again

from the penitentiary. He got out eight years ago for a few days, you know. She may have thought Naomi was clever enough to stand on her own feet. But Carrie had those twins of hers to think of. They were only seventeen then. It doesn't seem as if . . . Oh, well, what's the use of thinking about it? I may be all wrong."

Long listened to her wonderingly. He had never seen Catherine Chandler in this mood before.

"If I hadn't been on the other side of the world," she added, "Jane and Carrie might have come to me and told me their troubles. . . . I lost some sleep over that when I got the details. . . . I had just been given my own death sentence, and that cable was the turn of the screw." She stopped, then broke out suddenly: "Nicholas, tell me the truth! Has it ever occurred to you that that accident *wasn't* an accident?"

"Never, Catherine." He spoke positively, marveling over the strangeness of seeing his old friend off on this tack. It wasn't like her to concern herself with memories and regrets. She studied his face, and her own brightened.

"I hope you're right. Anyway, there's no one left now but the youngsters and my sister Anne Price. You can see for yourself what a mess she's made of her life. No brains, either—like all the rest of them, except me."

"The others were all much younger than you," Long somewhat restively pointed out. He had never learned to enjoy Catherine's frequent tributes to herself.

"Oh, yes, but they wouldn't have gained any sense if they had lived to be a hundred. However, I liked the children when they were babies, and my sister Anne was really adorable at three."

"She's rather charming still," Long suggested.

"She's a spineless jellyfish," Catherine Chandler contemptuously maintained, "and she has devoted her life to spoiling those two brats of hers. They're the most abominably selfish beasts I know of. I wish there were some way I could leave the money to Anne for life and cut them off; but I suppose that wouldn't do."

"Certainly not." The lawyer spoke with such decision that the sick woman uttered a short laugh. "That would ruin all her comfort in the legacy," he added more mildly.

"And I suppose she'd spend most of the income on them, and some of it might even go to that wretch she divorced," Miss Chandler mused aloud. "So let it stand," she added indifferently. "As to Carrie's twins, George will soon gamble away his share and then live on Ethel's. Henry Hutchins will buy a few more first editions and blink over them with his myopic eyes. That's all money will mean in his life. He's like his father. Naomi Sabin—What's she doing now?" she broke off to ask. "I suppose she told me, but I've forgotten."

"She had a little farm and was trying chicken-raising the last I heard," Long reported. "You really ought to have helped that girl more, Catherine."

"I ought to have helped them all more," his client unexpectedly admitted.

"Especially Naomi. She's the only one of the lot who hasn't had a cent of income beyond what she could earn, and she's shown herself very plucky," the lawyer pointed out. "She's mighty easy to look at, too."

"She's pretty, but I loathe that new type of independent, hard-as-nails American girl," the invalid muttered. "When I said I ought to have helped them more, I wasn't speaking of financial help. I suppose I should have given them some personal attention—shown some personal interest in them. After all, I'm their aunt, the head of their family, and the guardian of Naomi and George and Ethel." She uttered a mirthless cackle. "As a guardian I've been a good joke."

"The intelligent bystander would say you are making it up to them now, in this."

Long tapped with a forefinger the will he was holding.

"Financially, yes. How you men harp on money! I tell you, I'm beginning to think that it isn't enough. I haven't been sleeping well; and when I do drop off, I have the most infernal dreams about those youngsters. Perhaps it's because they all seem queer lately when they come to see me. They act as if they were rather desperate. Perhaps it's just because I'm hipped and I have too much time to think."

"That's it, of course. You're getting morbid."

"I wonder." She was half reclining on a chaise

longue by the window in her sick-room, while he sat beside her. She did not look at him, but stared down at her still beautiful hands, clasped together on the silk rug that covered her.

"Am I morbid?" she went on. "Or am I perhaps seeing things a little more clearly? There are moments when the selfishness and uselessness of the life I've lived appal me, Nick."

Long stirred restlessly. The dialogue was becoming a strain. He could not reassure her. She had been all she said—and worse.

"I wish I knew more about the lives they live and what sort of natures they really have," she brought out. "I wonder if there's any way I could find out. I don't even know anything about my sister Anne's private life. As a matter of fact, Nicholas, I've never taken enough interest to get more than a surface knowledge of them. But I suppose they're simply morons."

"They are not morons, my friend. They're just reasonably normal and attractive young people—as young people go to-day!"

"'As young people go to-day'!" his friend mocked. "One needn't know that bunch well to realize that they're all going to the devil as fast as they can. But much you care about it, you ease-loving old bachelor. As to attractiveness, there isn't a real charm in the lot of them, if you ask me. The girls are the slang-talking, face-painting, rank-natured individuals of this hideous period, and George is worse. Henry seems merely a white worm."

She shook off the mood that held her.

"However, they're my kin—unless I've been grossly deceived," she added with her sardonic grin. "So let them have what's coming to them. I suppose they'd go to law if I didn't leave them my money," she ended in a different tone. "I have a horror of suits and legal tangles and gossip about our family. That has always been an obsession of mine, as you know. It was really that scandal about Sabin that exiled me for years. See that there's no more scandal, Nicholas. If they get into trouble, hush it up."

He promised, and he recalled that promise as he looked down at Catherine Chandler's scornful lips. It should be an easy promise to keep. Everything was so simple. Every one would be satisfied. No reason why any of them should get into trouble.

The mortuary chapel was chill and close. He felt a sudden desire to be out of it, to be out of the house, to be motoring back to the city through the cold, crisp air. Even when she was a dying woman, his friend's amazing vitality had permeated her home like an atmosphere. Now the whole place seemed an exhausted receiver. . . . He laid a farewell glance on the dark, cynical face, on the soft white hair that so beautifully and incongruously framed it. For just one moment old memories came to him, like strains of far-away music. Then he sighed depressedly, and left the room. He would not look at Catherine again.

Johnson was waiting in the hall. That was like the good chap. He would be.

"Another drink, sir, before you go upstairs?" he sympathetically suggested.

But Long shook his head. He was a temperate man and one drink a day was his limit. When he came downstairs twenty minutes later he found the family assembled in the living-room—a sun-filled and cheerful apartment across the hall from the library, and with no suggestion of an exhausted receiver about it. Here, as in the dining-room, an open fire burned, and Catherine Chandler's nieces and nephews were grouped around it in lounging positions from which they only half aroused themselves to greet him. He knew them all and was interested in none, save possibly Naomi Sabin and Mrs. Price.

Even those two he thought of only when they crossed his line of vision. He had listened to stories of George Dixon's gambling and drinking propensities, and he knew of the utter devotion felt for her brother by George's twin sister, Ethel. The Price girls, ultra-modern to their painted finger-tips, he disapproved of almost as much as Catherine had done. He knew they were the types who impulsively open every door of life. They went in for excessive smoking, excessive drinking, all-night cabaret dancing; and he had reason to believe that all their views as to standards of human conduct were what he considered "peculiar."

For Naomi Sabin, dark, slender, really lovely to look upon, but tragic-eyed and smoldering of soul, he had the admiration a normal man feels for beauty and courage. Naomi was alone, and she asked no help

from any one. She had a definite air of remoteness, as if she arrogantly looked out over life as a mere spectator from the watch-tower of her youth. He knew nothing about her interests aside from the chicken farm, but that look in her eyes showed that she was not happy, and he suspected that she was bitter. Being a kindly man, he hoped the quarter of a million she would now inherit from her aunt might open a new world to her.

The young folks immediately resumed their languid discourse on the general rottenness of existence, which had been so briefly interrupted by his entrance. He sat down beside Mrs. Price, who seemed the only person in the room fully aware of his presence. He was a trifle piqued. He was not used to being ignored. But Mrs. Price made up for the bad manners of the younger generation. She was a charming woman, though, as her sister Catherine had said, a weak one. She had a livid pallor that betrayed ill health, but her manner was surprisingly animated, and she looked at Long with her faded eyes as if his presence filled the room. She talked, however, in a soft and husky voice, on the one topic that seemed to her appropriate.

"Didn't you think dear Catherine looked beautiful?" she asked.

"No," Long candidly admitted, "I didn't."

One of the Price girls—Catherine, he decided it was, and namesake of the dead woman—proved that she had not been really interested in the general conversation.

She uttered the hard little yelp that was her nearest approach to a laugh.

"That chapel effect they've arranged for Aunt C. C. is simply awful," she threw at Long over her shoulder. "It's just what they'd have done in one of those 'neat, complete and tasty funerals' you see advertised. Mother and Lil and I don't know a thing about arranging flowers for such occasions, so we had to let Wallace and Green do their worst. And all they thought of was to run up a big bill. They'd have banked the old girl in greenbacks if they dared."

"Catherine!" Mrs. Price sighed.

"I could have made a better job of it, and I told you I could," Lily Price snapped. The sisters always disagreed, but they were rarely apart.

"You'd have made it look like a pink tea," Catherine retorted; and Mrs. Price again sighed, "Hush, Catherine." Mrs. Price was always saying, "Hush, Lily," or "Hush, Catherine," but neither of her daughters ever hushed. Catherine went on now, speaking with the high-pitched voice and insolent indifference of her type:

"Aunt C. C. would have loathed it, of course. She really knew what was what, even if she did let her house remain the mid-Victorian horror it was when her father and mother died. But she always dressed beautifully, and her garden is a dream. How the devil she could stand for this stuff gets me," she ended, glancing around the room.

"That was sentiment, dear," her mother pointed out.

"If it was, it was the only streak of sentiment in Aunt C. C.," Ethel Dixon contributed. "I think it was just laziness. She hated bother. And she was abroad so much, till she got sick, that it didn't seem worth while to do the place over. I suppose after she was sick she thought any place was good enough to die in; and so it is."

"It's nothing of the sort. How can you talk such rot?" George Dixon broke in. "I've put in the odd moments of a misspent life trying to teach you what beauty is, Ethel," he went on discontentedly. "You've had me to look at, too, not to speak of Naomi. Yet with all your advantages you haven't learned a thing. If you expressed your innermost thoughts—which I hope to God you won't do, for they're usually appalling—you'd probably say you thought this was a pretty room."

"Well, it *is* comfortable," Ethel muttered; and George threw up his hands with a groan. He was a fair youth with broad shoulders, the closed face of a dreamer, and a really charming smile. His twin sister's bobbed head and fair face strikingly resembled his, but she lacked his sweetness of expression. From the neck up the twins looked like two perfect copies of the same boy.

"One ought to die among beauty," George insisted; "among ravishing beauty. I think I'd like to have you hold my hand, Naomi, when I pass away."

"There have been times, George, when I'd have loved doing it," Naomi said with a tolerant smile at him, and Catherine Price yelped again.

"Beauty ought to be the last thing to meet the eye," George went on, unperturbed. "How does one know what one's going to strike next?"

Johnson appeared at the door as a majestic intimation that the grief of the mourners was now to be assuaged by the uplift of the services. At the request of their central figure, these services were private. The only persons assembled in the library, in addition to the family procession which filed into it, ending with the lawyer, were the household servants, the two nurses who had cared for Miss Chandler in her last illness, a minister, a quartette from a church Miss Chandler had occasionally visited, and old Doctor Stephen Cary, seventy-three, and family physician to the Chandlers for forty years. He had attended the late Catherine whenever that erratic patient permitted him to do so, which was not often.

"None of you doctors knows anything," she had bitterly remarked during one of his final visits. "I went to half a dozen of you in the first stages of this devilish thing. If you had known anything, some of you might have saved me at that time. If you couldn't help me then, you certainly can't help me now."

Doctor Cary, who was irascible of manner himself, had not taken kindly to such candor. Neither had he pressed his services upon the patient, and he had bluntly informed the two specialists she permitted him to call

in six weeks before her death, that he was not very familiar with the case. Even at that, old Cary remembered as he passed the coffin and cast a last glance at its tenant, they had given her a year or more. . . .

The hymns sung by the quartette were really beautiful. The faces in the room—some of them very hard—took on a softer look. The minister was tactfully non-committal in his few remarks. The dead woman had lived a supremely selfish and self-centered life. He could not praise her, but he assumed that her going had left a void in the hearts of his hearers. Behind his back Catherine Price solemnly winked at George Dixon, and George choked and turned red, confirming the minister's conviction.

It was a subdued group, however, that stood around Catherine Chandler's grave a little later and heard the first clods fall into it. There is something in the sight of an open grave, and in the sound of earth falling upon a coffin, which makes for reflection. It brought seriousness even to the faces of the dead woman's nieces and nephews. In that moment most of them laid on her coffin the tribute of a moment's sincere regret. They might have called on her oftener, might have been nicer when they did call. Tears came to George Dixon's eyes. He wished the old girl were still alive, that he might have a chance to treat her better. In the automobile going home he expressed this regret to Lily Price, who administered brisk consolation.

"If she had seen any more of you, she'd have cut you off with fifty cents," Lily suggested. "Even as it

is, she has probably cut us all off—careful as we were not to get too near her.”

The reflection sobered still further the six young faces in the automobile. Mrs. Price and Long and the doctor were returning in another car.

Luncheon was a relief to every one. It was as good as Long had expected it to be, and Johnson, humbly assisted by the parlor-maid, served it to perfection.

“Isn’t there a drink in the house?” young Dixon anxiously inquired; but Johnson’s prompt negative was as firm as it was respectful. Long was glad his old friend had provided generously for Johnson. He also experienced a fresh regret that he could not avail himself of the services of that incomparable person. Johnson would be a comfort around a man’s apartment. Still, Stevens, though he was a little slow, wasn’t really bad. Nothing was bad—except the manners and general conduct of the Price girls, who had begun to smoke the moment they sat down at the table and who had already littered the lace centerpiece with cigarette stubs. Long was almost at peace with the world.

His characteristic benignity and charm were much in evidence when, after luncheon, he again faced the expectant group for the reading of Catherine Chandler’s will. They were back in the living-room now, with the doors guarded against interruption, and he made the atmosphere as informal as he could. It was difficult. The servants sat in a stiffly expectant row. Even Johnson, who could recall no precedent set by his great model for meeting such an occasion as this, was ob-

viously ill at ease; and the features of every member of the family were sharpened by a tense expectancy.

Long made short work of preliminaries. He briefly stated that though the writer of the will he was about to read had exacted much from others, she had also shown on occasions a finely generous spirit. This spirit she had again manifested in the making of her last will and testament, and he had every reason to believe that those for whom she had provided would be satisfied with the provisions. He adjusted his reading-glasses on his well-shaped nose and entered upon his task.

The early clauses of the will gave legacies to various charities—a bequest to the local Old Men's Home in memory of the testator's father, and to the local Old Ladies' Home in memory of her mother; funds for beds in various hospitals; a contribution to the minister's pet charity fund which might have made his funeral sermon more eloquent had he known of it in time; various scholarships in a near-by college in memory of the testator herself.

Next the servants were provided for. Six thousand dollars to her faithful butler, Emory Johnson, who had been in her service for almost a quarter of a century. Four thousand to her cook, Elizabeth Jenks, who had been with her for twenty years. Two thousand to her personal maid, Nora Smith, who had been with her for nine years, and who, though she had borne with fortitude the blow of her mistress's death, now gulped emotionally as the legacy was mentioned.

"She also gave me," Long stopped to interpolate,

"though she does not provide for them in her will, a special gift of five hundred dollars for each of the two nurses who attended her at the time of her death. Very generous provisions, all these," he thoughtfully repeated, taking off his glasses to wipe them with a spotless handkerchief he unfolded for the purpose; "very generous indeed."

Judging by the shining faces in the servants' row, the opinion was shared. Long readjusted the glasses and went on:

"The provisions for the family of the late Miss Chandler are on a relatively generous scale, and I think you will appreciate the fact that they are hampered by no conditions."

He read aloud, solemnly:

"To my sister, Anne Chandler Price, I give and bequeath five hundred thousand dollars. I make no special provisions for her two daughters, knowing that, following the dictates of her generous nature, she will share her income with them and that the principal will revert to them at her death.

"To my niece, Naomi Sabin, I give and bequeath two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

A slight gasp came from Naomi Sabin. Long glanced up, surprised by her lack of self-control, but she sat silent now, with downcast eyes. He read on:

"To my niece, Ethel Dixon, the same amount. To my nephews, George Dixon and Henry Hutchins, I give and

bequeath one hundred thousand dollars each. Being men, they should be able to make more money if they desire it."

A ripple passed over the small audience—a ripple of quiet amusement, proving that the gathering was now in a mood to take a joke. The lawyer smiled and continued the reading. There were further directions and provisions which did not affect the principal legacies. At the end he laid down the document and beamed on the alert assemblage.

"It isn't often," he told his audience, "that one has the pleasure of reading a will which is so sane, so balanced, and so satisfactory to the majority of the heirs."

He stopped in surprise. He had been conscious of the unobtrusive departure, from the room, of the admirable Johnson. He now became aware of that servitor's return. Johnson, indeed, was standing directly in front of him, presenting a note on a tray.

"I beg pardon, sir," he murmured, "but Miss Webb assures me that this matter is urgent." He added humbly, as Long gave him for the first time one of the sudden eye-thrusts for which he was famous in legal circles: "I understand it has to do with final orders from Miss Chandler herself. Otherwise I could not have allowed myself this interruption."

Long took the note from the tray and with a murmured apology to his audience opened it, still frowning. Its contents did not clear his brow. Instead they

gave him a definite sense of uneasiness. He read and re-read the note:

MY DEAR MR. LONG:

Following the instructions of the late Miss Chandler, I am asking you to come to me in the library *after* the reading of the will—but not till it is finished—to receive certain documents from her.

It is also her wish that the heirs—with the exception of the servants—shall remain where they are till you return to them.

Sincerely yours,

HOPE WEBB.

Long's glance swept over the group before him. Its members were silent and watchful now, as if they, too, realized that only an important message would have been permitted to interrupt the proceedings. In the interval before he spoke the lawyer's brain did some quick work. Should he slip out of the room with merely a murmured excuse for a few moments' absence? The note might mean anything or nothing. As representing Catherine Chandler, whose nature was erratic and whose impulses were sudden, it might mean a great deal. It would be well, he decided, to give those before him a hint of the nature of his call. It might prepare them—but the rest of the thought was absurd. He banished it and smiled at the serious faces, which smiled back with quick relief.

"I'm told in this note," he cheerfully announced,

"that Miss Chandler left some final instructions which are to be given to me now. She evidently meant the family to hear them, for I am to ask you to stay here till I get back. That ought to be in about five minutes. The servants may leave now."

He added the last sentence from the threshold as he left the room. The servants, in a decorous line headed by Johnson, followed him into the hall. Reassured by Long's manner, those who remained immediately began to talk. As the living-room door closed, Long heard the sudden upgush of speech, with Ethel Dixon's clear voice dominating. Most young folks, he had observed, spoke far too loudly nowadays.

"Never mind, Georgie darling," she was saying. "You can have half of mine. And won't it be simply wonderful . . ."

He went into the library, where only a few hours before its mistress had lain in what the undertaker had described as "state." Now the center of the big room was empty and the extra chairs in it had been pushed back against the walls. The funeral flowers were still there, and their increasingly heavy odor greeted him as he crossed the threshold. He closed the door behind him and cast a rather inquisitorial glance at the waiting nurse who rose to meet him.

He remembered Miss Webb as the tight-lipped, sometimes resentful-eyed, but handsome young woman he had seen in the invalid's room during the last six months of his client's life. She had fine features and a

complexion of the pleasing texture that goes with auburn hair and brown eyes. She was still in her immaculate white uniform, but she was no longer tight-lipped and resentful. Her face bore evidence of grief—the only such evidence he had seen that day. Her manner was nicely keyed to the quiet harmonies of a house of mourning. She was not in awe of lawyers or of any one else. She was merely performing a task that lay somewhat outside her province.

“I’m afraid you will think this is a nuisance, Mr. Long,” she said, professionally. “But Miss Chandler’s instructions to me were very clear. Johnson was to let me know as soon as you finished reading the will, out there. Then I was to send for you and give you this.”

She handed him a long envelop which he opened at once. It held two inclosures—a second long envelop, smaller than the first, and a letter. The long envelop bore a sentence which leaped up to meet his eyes: “Not to be opened. Await later instructions.” The letter’s envelop bore the line: “To be opened after reading the will.”

He raised his eyes and met those of Miss Webb. She spoke as if she had read his thoughts.

“I’m afraid it’s something unpleasant,” she said in a low voice.

“What makes you think that?”

Absently but methodically Long had put the larger envelop into an inside pocket of his coat and inserted

a firm forefinger under the flap of the envelop containing the letter he was to read. Her words checked the action:

"Several things. Among them, her expression when she gave me the instructions." As the hearer's eyebrows rose, Miss Webb hurried on, with her first evidence of nervousness: "It was the look she always wore when she was going to do something unexpected. A sort of grim 'Make-the-best-of-this' attitude. Probably you know it. You have seen it."

Long nodded. He had seen it often enough. He walked to the door, opened it, and held it ajar for Miss Webb.

"Thank you very much," he said, and with an effort threw in his best smile. "There was nothing else, was there?"

The nurse accepted her dismissal and moved across the threshold.

"Nothing at present," she said. She stopped on the other side of the door and looked up at him. He again observed her obvious depression, and now he saw the telltale redness of her eyes. "But there's another matter I'd like to talk over with you before you leave the house," she added. "Can you spare the time?"

Long thought he understood. Probably she had heard of that five-hundred-dollar gift. Possibly Miss Chandler had told her of it as she had told Johnson of his legacy.

"I'm due in town for an early dinner," he said,

"and it's almost four now. But probably you won't need more than a few minutes?"

The last sentence was a question and Miss Webb answered it as such.

"I'll let you judge of that," she said quietly, as she left him.

CHAPTER II

LONG HAS A SHOCK

LEFT alone, Long noiselessly turned the key in the lock of the door and sat down in the nearest chair. For some reason which would have been hard to explain, he could not have opened that letter under the eyes of Miss Hope Webb. He inwardly admitted that he dreaded opening it now. He completed the finger-thrust and drew out many sheets of thin paper, dated four days before Catherine Chandler's death and filled with her cramped but clear script.

MY DEAR OLD FRIEND [he read] :

It's a shabby trick I'm playing you—or at least you will think it is. It isn't, really. True, I've made another will, and I've made it through another lawyer, and I've had it witnessed by Miss Webb and the new parlor-maid. You won't approve of the action nor of the will. I have also evolved a certain policy and written out certain instructions and conditions to be followed by my expectant heirs. You won't approve of these either. But you will continue to act for me just the same. The man Sloan, of Stanton, Harding and Sloan, understands that his interest in my affairs began and ended with the drawing of the new document. It is for you, as executor and trustee, to see that its provisions are carried out. I had to have some one else draw it, because I wasn't up to the fierce debate you

would have started if I had called you in. You are very opinionated, Nicholas, and you sometimes talk too much!

All these changes I am making have come as a result of my talk with you three months ago, the last time we discussed my will. I became obsessed by the idea that I must know more about my family than I did. I took measures to learn more; and God knows I've found out more than I bargained for!

I've learned many things; horrible things some of them, things they do not dream that any one suspects. They are in some ways infinitely worse than I thought them; in some ways better. I can't feel that they are beyond hope. And—you will smile at this, Nicholas, if you are not too furious at the moment to smile at anything—I not only have a wish to help them, but a conviction that I can do it. To leave them a lot of money now, with authority over it, would be to complete their destruction.

They have got themselves into an appalling impasse. Perhaps from my grave I can do more for them than I ever did in life. At least I must try, though I realize that I have very little time. You must help me. You will be able to relieve Namoi of her burden, and to handle the matter of Anne and Lily, and to take up other issues as they appear. I shall let you discover the conditions for yourself. I want you to approach the whole question without prejudice and with an open mind.

I let you read the original will to them because I wanted them to know what they'd have had if they had run straight. They will know better than you do why I have changed that will. I shall seem heartless and cruel, but that will not surprise them. They will understand it only too well.

I have experimented with them, and in that, too, I was cruel. But I had to know what they were at heart. I reproach myself and I've paid heavily. My experiment has been a boomerang. It has got on my nerves. But at least I can be sport enough to stand by my guns. Anything that happens is up to me and not to them—not to any of them. Remember that, Nicholas.

Go back now and read my decision and conditions to them. You won't be as bland and pink and smiling after you've done it as you undoubtedly were when you read the will. You're getting indolent, old friend, and you like the easy, pleasant way. The new conditions will make you work a bit—will shake you out of your pleasant routine. That will be good for you, and of course you'll be paid for it. I haven't lived sixty years without realizing that I can't ask service from any one, even from such a friend as you are, without paying for it. So I will pay, and pay well—as you will see.

The new will is not to be opened at once. Later you will receive some special instructions about it. In the meantime you will draw on the proceeds of those bonds which I forced you to sell. You will remember that I also made you credit the price to your own account, to await further instructions. You will draw on that fund for the expenses of the estate until further notice.

Let me add, dear Nicholas, that I am sure you will faithfully carry out all my instructions and requests, however you may deplore them. For in a world sadly deficient in loyalty and friendship I have never yet found you wanting.

CATHERINE CHANDLER.

P. S. Work with Miss Webb. She understands a good

deal. I wish I'd had the nerve to talk all this over with you, but my courage is gone! I shall not outlive it very long.

There were more sheets. No doubt they contained the plan and instructions to be read.

Long laid the letter on a chair beside him, took out his handkerchief, and wiped his handsome, wholesome face. There had been a time, many years ago, when he had almost asked Catherine Chandler to marry him. Since then he had frequently congratulated himself on not having done so. He now congratulated himself again. He took up the remaining sheets and deliberately read them. At the end of the reading his face was very stern. He re-folded the pages, slipped them into the envelop which he retrieved from the floor, and after a few moments of reflection slowly made his way back to the living-room.

There the formal ranks of the earlier meeting had broken up. Mrs. Price, her worn face for once flushed with excitement, was in a big chair by the fire, a daughter perched on each broad arm of it. George and Ethel Dixon sat side by side on the floor, facing the flames, while Henry Hutchins, looking for once almost animated, stood with his back to them, an elbow on the mantel, talking to Naomi Sabin, who listened from her place in a deep wing-chair. Young Dixon, who had been splashing conversation over the rest with his usual inconsequence, alone heard the lawyer reënter. He greeted him buoyantly.

"Welcome back to your Sunday-school class, dear teacher," he called out. "Observe that we're smiling from east to west." He grinned exaggeratedly. "For weeks we've only smiled from north to south, like this." He curved his lips downward in a sanctimonious burlesque. "In short, we're behaving pretty well when you remember that the present impulse of our untamed natures is to dance a cancan. But that wouldn't be pretty, would it?"

"No; and it would be a little premature." Long approached them slowly, glad that George had given him so good a cue.

Naomi Sabin was the only one in the group who grasped the significance of his reply.

"Premature?" she quoted. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean—" Long spoke heavily, but he had decided to let them have it straight—"I mean that another document has just been handed to me. The will read to you has been in existence for several years, and was again formally approved by Miss Chandler only three months ago. Naturally I had every reason to assume that it represented her final wishes. But it appears that last week Miss Chandler made another will." He watched the color drain from the faces of Mrs. Price and Naomi Sabin, and took in the stupefied, incredulous stare of the rest. "I'm afraid you may find it disappointing," he ended. "But we shall not know its financial provisions for some time."

For a moment a deep silence hung over the room.

Then Naomi spoke, her tragic eyes on the whispering fire.

"I'm not surprised," she said dully. "I didn't really expect anything . . . good . . . from Aunt Catherine."

The voice of Mrs. Price rose above Naomi's, and Long, as he turned to her, was shocked by the stretched, gray look of her skin as she cried, "It can't be . . . you don't mean . . ." through colorless lips, and then burst into sudden, hysterical weeping. Neither of her daughters offered her comfort. They sat very still on the arms of the chair, staring into the fire, their hard young faces wearing new masks of sullenness.

Henry Hutchins laughed on two short notes.

"Why did she do it that way?" he asked the lawyer. "Why did she rouse our hopes? Had you no suspicion at all of a second will?"

"None at all." Long was glad to have that assurance underlined. "She called in another lawyer, only last week, as I told you, and without my knowledge. As to why she did it—" an irrepressible sigh broke from him—"your aunt had her own way of doing things. But she said you would all understand this action better than I should."

"I'll tell the world I understand it," George Dixon muttered. He added under his breath, "I know why she let me out, all right, all right."

Long reflected that they all knew that. Naomi spoke again, with a break in her voice. She seemed to be making a strong effort at self-control:

"Do you know anything about the provisions of this second will, Mr. Long?"

"Very little. As I've said, it's not to be opened at once. I'm to have instructions later. But there's a definite plan to be followed in the interval. I am to put that before you and to see that it's carried out."

"Then why not let us have the plan?"

Naomi had the brains of the group, the lawyer decided. Moreover, she was getting herself in hand. Every remark she made had been to the point, and now she had the air of deliberately coming to his assistance.

"I will read it at once," he said, with a grateful glance at her.

The second document began with a concise statement that the bequests to charities and to the servants, made in the first will, were repeated in the second with slight modifications, which were mentioned. Johnson would be relieved, Long reflected. No doubt Johnson had been disturbed, feeling something unexpected in the atmosphere. The lawyer raised his eyes from the closely written pages and looked around the motionless semicircle.

"I think I'll just give you the gist of the rest of this," he said, his agreeable voice hardening a trifle under the strain of his task. "I am given considerable latitude, it appears, and I rather think it will be easier for you to have, first of all, a brief summary of Miss Chandler's general plan. We'll have plenty of time to go into details later."

He talked for five minutes, but he did not look at

individuals as he spoke. He had cast one glance at the leaden, desperate face of Mrs. Price, who was quiet again but sat crouching forward, staring before her with unseeing eyes. He had taken in, in that same glance, the suddenly old look on the face of Naomi, and the despair of the Dixons. Those revelations were enough. Both the Prices and the Dixons, he knew, were at the end of their financial tether. Mrs. Price had been drawing on her small capital for years. George Dixon had long since squandered the patrimony their mother had left the twins, and had been borrowing heavily at ruinous rates of interest on his "expectations." The new plan spelled nothing short of tragedy to the Prices and Dixons.

As he approached the end of his résumé, however, he found courage for another eye-flash at Naomi. She was still in the wing-chair, her silk-clad legs crossed and showing to the knees, her bobbed black head with its shining high lights resting against the chair's high back. Her dark, lovely face wore a look of smoldering intensity. Her blue eyes, the bluest eyes Long had ever seen, were fixed on the blazing logs. But there was no detachment in her easeful pose. He knew that she was following every word with strained attention.

Coming down to brass tacks, he ended, what the plan meant was that they were all to be on some sort of probation for six months, during which time they would receive nothing from the estate. However, they would be under no expense for shelter or food. They were to spend that interval in Miss Chandler's home,

as her guests. Any of them who refused to live in the house during the stipulated period, or who, having consented to do so, should be absent from it or break its rules, automatically yielded by such absence or conduct his or her claims to any future benefit.

"This indicates that the new will provides for you in some degree at least," the lawyer interpolated, and went on to outline the conditions. The table would be supplied on a scale suited to a family of nine, but for any entertaining individuals wished to do they themselves must pay. No tobacco or liquor would be allowed the family during the period of probation.

"Why, the old whited sepulcher!" George Dixon cried, startled out of his usual calm. "She smoked, herself, like a chimney! I've seen her at it, every time I came here."

"The clause means," Long patiently explained, "that the household budget will not include allowance for these things. It does not forbid them to those who can afford to buy them as individuals, from their private purses."

"I'll spend all I've got on 'em," George cheerfully announced, and Naomi turned on him an enigmatic glance. "I don't know any place where one would need 'em more than in this family tomb," he sulkily observed in response to her look.

"Mr. Long, what does she mean by the family of nine?" Catherine Price asked. "There are only seven of us."

"That appears to be the little joker in the pack,"

the lawyer dryly explained. "Miss Chandler has been kind enough to include Miss Webb and me in her plans for the coming six months. She also includes herself. The chair at the head of the table will always be vacant, to represent Miss Chandler's unseen presence among us."

"God!" said George Dixon. "That'll be a cheery situation!"

Long cast a swift glance around the assemblage, and was interested in the various reactions to his announcement. Mrs. Price's colorless face turned grayer. Naomi Sabin smiled a twisted smile. The rest of the group dropped their eyes, showing no emotion, till Henry Hutchins broke a long moment of silence.

"I can understand perfectly why she has included you, sir," he said, neatly avoiding the issue of the hostess's empty chair. "You're evidently to be our judge and jury, as it were; and I think we all realize that we couldn't have a fairer one, or one we'd be more willing to live in the same house with."

"Thank you, Henry," Mr. Long said gravely.

"But what I can't see," Hutchins amplified, "is why Miss Webb is in on this. By all the rules, she's a rank outsider. And though she stood by for six months, on salary, it seemed plain enough that there was no love lost between her and Aunt C. C."

"I don't quite understand that, myself," Long admitted. "But, for that matter, it's hard to understand the whole affair, and there certainly are details of it—"

"Such as some one of us going alone to Aunt C. C.'s

room every night during the first week we're here, and sitting there for half an hour," Catherine ironically murmured.

Mrs. Price sprang to her feet.

"The whole thing is terrible," she cried, with the note of hysteria in her voice which had been there when she last spoke. "It's a monstrous joke she's playing on us, and I, for one, won't stand it!"

"Sit down, Mother. Don't let her get your goat," Lily Price coolly advised. "She'd enjoy doing that, even from her grave."

"I can't tell you what my late client's object was," Long repeated. "She was sure you would all understand without telling. And certainly I think you realize that she didn't see fit to take me fully into her confidence. But in the course of my thirty years of professional relations and friendship with Miss Chandler I discovered that, however erratic her actions seemed at times, she usually had sound reasons for them. I don't know why Miss Webb is in this. Perhaps she herself doesn't know. But you can safely assume that Miss Chandler was very sure of herself and her object when she made a new will and all these plans, and as we go on we shall understand them better. The sensible thing to do in the meantime is to take a cheerful view of the matter.

"We're going to be somewhat inconvenienced, I fear," he added with an irrepressible sigh. He had never realized until this moment how much he had enjoyed the peaceful separateness of the unmarried.

"It will be hard for me to leave my bachelor quarters, where I've been pretty comfortable for fifteen years. For a few moments I felt that I couldn't do it. And Miss Chandler didn't give us much time to turn around. She wants us all here within a week. Fortunately, the house is big, so we needn't be under one another's feet. Miss Chandler's own room, I see, is to be left unoccupied, as well as the store-room on the floor above it. Aside from those two rooms, we can spread ourselves as we please. The present household staff will remain, and, as you know, it's excellent. I dare say we'll be very comfortable," he bravely ended. "After all, it's only for six months. Let's consider it a country-house visit and a new experience."

"I suppose there's no way of breaking that second will—of proving undue influence or unsound mental powers or anything of the kind?" Catherine Price suggested.

"No. Miss Chandler has provided against that. Any one who starts an action loses out all along the line."

"Then wouldn't it be a good idea to make the best of things?" Catherine abruptly brought out. "As we're all together now, why don't we go over the house and select our quarters?"

"That would be an excellent plan."

Long rose, thinking better of Catherine Price; and the others, slightly intrigued by the prospect of "prowling through the mausoleum," as George expressed it, followed his example. Long summoned Johnson, and,

when the butler came, addressed him cheerfully. He had recovered his poise. Despite thirty years in the law, Nicholas Long was still an optimist. No doubt everything would work out all right. This was merely one of Catherine's eccentric notions. He didn't attach much importance to her discoveries. Of course any discoveries she had made about the Dixons and the Price girls would be startling to her.

"Johnson," he said, "I suppose you've heard that there are to be some radical changes around here."

"I had suspected as much, sir." Johnson's voice shook a trifle. The great Briggs had given him no blue-print for such a moment as this.

"Don't be disturbed. You'll get your legacy; in fact, you are to have seven thousand dollars instead of six."

"That's very gratifying, sir." Johnson was relieved but dazed.

"There's a little string to it," Long went on. "You're to stay on in Miss Chandler's service another half-year, and we're all to live here. We're still to look on Miss Chandler as the head of the family, and we're not to forget that she is our hostess."

Johnson was now sure that the whole thing was a hoax. His plump body had a collapsing look.

"All to live here, sir?" he faltered, and tried to smile at the joke.

"Yes. It's one of Miss Chandler's original ideas. She had a lot of them, you know. We must make the

best of this one. We're going to select our new quarters right now. Have you time to go over the house with us?"

"Certainly, sir." Johnson was reassured. If this was a dream, it was a realistic one. Mr. Long's manner had never been more convincing.

"All right then, lead the way. I suppose the general idea," Long added as the entire party left the room, "is to give the ladies their choice of the quarters on the second floor, while we bachelors camp out on the third."

"Yes, sir. Do I understand, sir, that you yourself are to be with us?"

"Yes, and Miss Webb, too."

Johnson led the way with buoyant steps. He was to have seven thousand dollars at the end of six months. The new business could wait. Meantime Mr. Long, whom he greatly admired, would doubtless be the head of the house. That was a little bit of all right.

"Would you care to see the late Miss Chandler's rooms first, sir?" he asked as the procession reached the upper landing.

"We'll have a look at them. But we must not refer to her as 'the late Miss Chandler.' She's supposed to be still among us. No one will use the room where she died. It's to be left just as it is; but kept in perfect order, of course, as if she were occupying it."

"Certainly, sir."

Johnson threw open a door at the right of the front hall, and Catherine Chandler's guests crowded about

the threshold. The room was large and sun-filled, and its two front windows faced a wide lawn, while its side windows overlooked a really beautiful garden. The room's furniture, like that of the rest of the house, was of the perdurable mid-Victorian type. The huge bed in which its owner had exhaled her last sigh raised its carved walnut headboard almost to the ceiling. The walnut bureau and dressing-case had marble tops. A rather faded Brussels carpet covered the floor. Three incongruous notes were furnished by a superb Chinese chair with a throne back, a startlingly new phonograph, and a chaise longue, the latter gay with chintz and cushions and standing by the wide side window.

The chaise longue had been the sick woman's favorite resting-place during her illness, and each member of the present company had seen her in it many times. All eyes went to it now, as if expecting to see the long, gaunt figure, the dark, handsome, sardonic face, the hard, brilliant eyes of its late occupant. They appeared to be there. For a moment at least Catherine Chandler's guests had a heart-shaking sense of the actual presence of their hostess. Mrs. Price shrank back from the door. Ethel Dixon's hand reached out and caught her brother's arm.

"If she's here, she's gloating over us all," Lily Price muttered; and she added dispassionately, "Damn her!"

"Lily! How dare you!"

The words burst from Mrs. Price's lips in a shriek, and for once Lily Price looked self-conscious.

"I suppose I oughtn't to have said it," she muttered. "Just the same, she's played us a rotten trick; and if she's where she knows about it, I'll bet she's glad she did it."

"That'll be about all from you, Lil," Catherine Price said evenly. "See what you're doing to Mother!"

Long saw the eyes of the two girls meet and hold. Then Lily shrugged her thin shoulders with a gesture of surrender and was silent. Mrs. Price, obviously struggling for self-control, moved away from the rest and across the hall. The lawyer was interested in that brief eye-duel between the sisters. He knew now that Catherine Price was the ruling spirit of her family.

Off Miss Chandler's chamber was a good-sized dressing-room, used for the past two years as a bedroom for nurses, and between the two rooms was a large bathroom, with up-to-date tub and equipment.

"I suppose Miss Webb will prefer to keep the dressing-room and bathroom," Long mused aloud as his eye took in these details. "She's used to them, and I see there's an exit into the hall from the dressing-room. The connecting door into Miss Chandler's room could be kept locked."

"Very well, sir."

Johnson accepted the suggestions as an order, and the others appeared to approve them. The party followed Mrs. Price across the hall, to a door opposite Miss Chandler's. The room they entered was very similar to hers, its side windows looking out on the

vista of another lawn and distant rows of dolorous pines and cedars.

"Would this suit you, Mrs. Price?" Long was quietly taking charge, but no one resented his leadership. "It occurs to me that if it would, your daughters could take the connecting dressing-room—I assume that they're in the habit of rooming together—and you could all three use the bathroom. Then you'd have a little suite to yourselves."

"It will do nicely, thank you." But the voice of Mrs. Price held the flat tones of utter depression.

"That seems to solve the whole problem," Long said. "As I remember it, there are two large rear rooms, looking over the back garden and with a bathroom between them, which might do for Miss Dixon and Miss Sabin. Let's go and look at them."

He spoke with almost his normal cheerfulness. His mind had now accepted the personal upheaval before him. Surely there was no tragedy in being made comfortable for six months in a fine old house like this.

Ethel Dixon and Naomi Sabin inspected their rooms indifferently, and both approved them with a word. Johnson led the pageant up the staircase to the third floor.

"I'm used to quick decisions," Long said as they all stopped on the upper landing. "If you lads don't mind, I'll take the big front room over Miss Chandler's, because I'm an older man and a selfish one. You young chaps can have the two rear rooms just above

Miss Sabin's and Miss Dixon's. In return for my superior accommodations I'll put in a new bathroom for the three of us, as there's none on this floor. It will be an up-to-date one, I promise you, with a good shower. I dare say there's a big old linen closet or something of that sort that will make over into an excellent bathroom." To Johnson he added, "There are no quarters here for Stevens, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"H-m-m. I might give him a six-months leave of absence," Long mused. "I happen to know he's very anxious to go back to Scotland for a visit. Could you look after me?"

"It would be a pleasure, sir." Johnson spoke eagerly, seeing a generous addition to his income.

"Then that's settled."

"Long's methods are the subtle ones of a steam-roller," George murmured to Henry Hutchins. "But fortunately his ideas are pretty good, and certainly he's quick on the trigger."

Unconscious of this compliment, Long beamed mildly upon his companions. It was absurd to get upset over unexpected happenings. With a little patience and judgment one could usually shape events. . . . And probably they'd all be as well off in six months as they had thought themselves after the will was read. By this time he was almost convinced of that. Yes, things were sure to work out satisfactorily. . . .

His sense of well-being lasted while they were descending the two flights of stairs. He stopped in the

front hall, at a point where hats and coats could be reached without delay.

"Then I think there's nothing else?" He glanced from one to the other of the group, eager to be off. "Everything's quite understood, isn't it? A week from to-day finds us all settled here." He turned to the waiting butler, hovering in the background. "I'll have the plumbers at work on that new bathroom early to-morrow morning. They must make a rush job of it."

"What I'd like to know," Lily Price suddenly brought out, "is where we're going to get money for our other expenses during those six months."

She had voiced what all of them were thinking save Henry Hutchins, who was earning a living wage. Every eye in the group steadfastly fixed itself on Long's face.

"Oh," he said, in some embarrassment. "Oh, well, the expenses of the move into this house will be met by the estate. Miss Chandler has provided for that. Here, in the matter of lodging, food and service, we'll be guests. Unfortunately, no provision has been made for other expenses. You'll have to go on as you've been doing."

"Then how can we pay our debts?" Ethel Dixon wanted to know. As Long did not answer this poignant cry, her brother did it for him.

"We won't pay them," he ruled. "We've no money to waste on debts. That's nothing new. What interests me—"

"Then I'll say good afternoon," Long interrupted.

"I have to meet an early dinner engagement in town."

He did not meet that engagement. He had forgotten Miss Webb and her appointment, but Miss Webb had not forgotten him. As he hurried past the library door, it opened and the nurse stood waiting, still garbed in her white uniform. By this time Long's hat was in his hand, his overcoat was on his arm. She read the meaning of these things, but her manner was unhurried.

"I'm afraid what I have to say may be a shock to you," she began when he had followed her into the library and taken a chair near the one in which she seated herself. He still carried his hat and coat, and she glanced at them as she spoke; but the glance was the type that dismisses the object it rests upon.

"I owe you an apology," he confessed. "I'm ashamed to say that I forgot—"

"I know. You had reason enough." She was actually trying to put him at his ease, and the lawyer smiled dryly. "It has been a hard day," she went on. "I know you're in a hurry, too. But I think you'll find that what I have to say is important."

Long sighed and waited. It *had* been a hard day. It was still a hard day. As soon as one began to feel a slight lessening of its tension, something else came along to tighten that tension again.

"Yes?" he said rather wearily. He had been lounging a trifle in his chair because the chair happened to be comfortable. Miss Webb's next words brought him upright.

"Mr. Long," she said, "I think it is my duty to tell you that I am not sure Miss Chandler's death was a natural one."

He turned, and the look he gave her was as menacing as an upraised blade. "What's that you're saying?"

"I think—in fact, I'm almost sure—that Miss Chandler was poisoned." She let this sink in before she made her next remarkable statement: "I believe she thought so, too."

For a moment the lawyer studied her in frowning silence. He realized that the young woman, wild though her statements were, was speaking with conviction.

"If you thought these things, why did you wait till now to report them?" he curtly demanded.

"For two reasons. The first is that I'm not sure I'm right. The second is that I *am* sure Miss Chandler wanted it done this way."

"What makes you think that?"

"Her change of will only a few days before her death, and the fact that she is herding us all together in this house."

"You know about that?"

"Yes, I do. Four days before her death, the day she made the new will, she told me a little about her plans. You see, Jennie and I witnessed the will. She ordered us both to say nothing about it to any one. When she and I were alone again she talked to me. She asked me to stay on, at double wages. She wants

us all herded here together till some scheme she made works out—”

Long shook off the sense of unreality that was stealing over him.

“Why in God’s name should any one kill her?” he muttered. “She had to die soon, anyway.”

“Not soon enough, perhaps, to suit some one who was in a hurry for her money. You know, only six weeks ago the specialists gave her another year, perhaps even two years.”

“Have you given a hint of this notion of yours to any one else?”

“Only to Doctor Cary.”

“Ah!” Long leaped at the admission. “What did Cary say to it?”

“He simply jeered.” Miss Webb’s firm lips set resentfully. For a moment she looked as Long remembered her. “He thought I was worn out. Doctor Cary is not modern, you know, and he isn’t especially observant, either. He didn’t come often, and he wasn’t in close touch with the case. I doubt if he even knows anything about the new slow-acting poison I now suspect was used. But I admit that it’s only a suspicion; I have no proofs.”

“Wouldn’t an autopsy have shown?”

“Of course. But the poison’s very subtle. It works slowly and leaves less trace than most others. Its final symptoms—paralysis of the legs, abdominal pains, and all that—are the usual symptoms of Miss Chandler’s disease in its last stages.”

"How do you happen to know so much about it?"

"I once had a case in which it figured."

"All right. We won't go into that now."

"I have no intention of going into it." Miss Webb's tone suggested that she was speaking to him from the hinterlands of space. "I merely answered your question."

Long got up and stood before her, looking down into the brown eyes she raised to meet his.

"Miss Webb," he said quietly, "I beg your pardon. I shouldn't have spoken as I did. But I needn't tell you that what you have just said has been a shock to me. Even yet I can't take it in. A suspicion like that, expressed by the patient's nurse . . ."

Miss Webb nodded understandingly, but she said nothing and Long turned and walked toward the window, hands deep-thrust in his trousers' pockets and shoulders bent a little as if under an unexpected weight.

"Hadn't she perhaps exhausted herself with all the business and dictation and letter-writing I understand was going on?" he asked at last, over his shoulder.

"She would have if she had done it often. But the last few weeks she saw almost no one except the family. Of course they continued to trail in and out. I had persuaded her to drop most of the daily business interviews she had been having with Jackson and White."

"If she died of poison—assuming for a moment

that you're right—mightn't she have taken it herself?"

"Never! She wasn't that kind." The nurse's head rose in scornful repudiation of the suggestion. "Besides, she couldn't possibly have done it, even if she had wanted to. She had completely lost the use of her legs. Her bed was made two or three times a day, so she couldn't have hidden anything. And her medicine tables with their drawers and boxes were all on the other side of the room. She wouldn't have anything of the kind near her. She loathed the atmosphere of a sick-room, poor dear, and all the paraphernalia that went with it—including her nurses, some days," she ended with a sigh.

The lawyer wheeled toward her and expressed the thought he was clinging to:

"You say Cary doesn't take any stock in this suspicion of yours."

"That's true, but I've told you why. A younger doctor might have looked at it differently. Of course it is merely a theory," she added, and was silent again, plainly giving him time to reflect. "I didn't think of it seriously, myself, till she died and I began to wonder why she went so much sooner than we had expected. Then I found myself putting two and two together, and I've been doing it ever since.

"The point is that I wasn't alone in my suspicions," she went on as he stood thoughtfully regarding her. "I am convinced that Miss Chandler was suspicious. I had realized for weeks that she was afraid of some-

thing—that she was getting nervous and frightened. That wasn't like her. Four days before her death she began to comment on her symptoms and to talk about family scandals and crimes, and her horror of publicity. She said if anything scandalous came up in her case, no matter what it was, she'd know how to meet it without calling in the police. And she added that if there was anything going on I didn't understand, I was to keep my mouth shut. That's exactly the way she put it. You know how brusque she was. Right after that, the same morning, she made me telephone for the new lawyer. Then she wrote a long letter to some one—to you, I suppose."

A sudden memory came to Long. Catherine Chandler had said: "Work with Miss Webb. She understands a good deal." His shoulders sagged lower. He realized in that moment that he was no longer a young man.

"All this may be pure imagination," he asserted. "Yours and hers. Or, more likely, you imagined hers."

"It may be. Doctor Cary thought it was nerves, and he advised me to have a rest. Of course when I saw how he was taking it I dropped the subject. I'm sure he'll never recommend me for another case." She went on in a different tone: "Miss Chandler did a lot of thinking the last weeks of her life. There were things going on I didn't understand, but I knew she was frightened and worried. She would lie staring at the wall for hours. . . ."

The woman was actually impressing him, though

Long fought hard against the mental admission.

"Do you think she suspected any particular person?" he asked after another brief silence.

"No, that's just the point. It's to solve that question that she's . . ."

"Herding us all together." He hastened to supply the words, feeling that he could not endure hearing them again from her lips. "If it's all guesswork, as it appears to be, what was your object in telling me now?"

"I think she expected you and me to work it out, without police aid or publicity at any time. Besides, she told me to tell you."

"What!"

Miss Webb seemed startled by his vehemence. "She tacitly told me to. She said I was to consult you during our six months here whenever I needed advice. But of course we've got to proceed with the utmost tact. We've no case at all as the thing stands now. And Doctor Cary is definitely against us."

"Definitely against you, you mean. You're assuming entirely too much. You haven't convinced me that there's anything in this."

"I think time will convince you." The nurse spoke with calm conviction. She had shot her arrow into the air and seemed sure it would find its mark. "Time . . . and other things."

Long walked stiffly to the chair where he had left his hat and coat and put on the coat.

"Well, you've relieved your mind," he brought out.

Then, his gloves forgotten in his hands, he stood looking at her uncertainly. "I'm not at all sure that there's anything in this," he sternly repeated. "I believe it's a mare's nest. Of course you won't mention it to any one else."

"She told me not to; that is, she said not to confide in any one else."

It was all so like Catherine. Given the conditions the nurse suspected, it was just the sort of thing Catherine would have done. This was the reflection that persisted, that disturbed him.

"It takes some thinking over," he admitted at last. "Meantime I must get back to town. I'll be out again to-morrow or the next day." He turned to the relief of practical details. "I suppose you're to act as a sort of super-housekeeper here, and get the place ready for our invasion."

"That was what Miss Chandler told me to do."

"Good-by, then; I'm off," he said, and started.

He wouldn't even wait for Johnson to open the car door, though that willing servitor had followed him down the front steps. Waterford was twenty miles away and he made the run back in half an hour. He wanted to get as far as he could from Catherine Chandler's house. He had taken care not to see any of the family again before he left—that family in which Catherine Chandler had perhaps imagined there was a killer. A nice six months he'd have, shut up with that group . . . with that suspicion in his mind . . . for of course it was in his mind. . . .

The fresh November air braced him up, but he drove as though pursued by something tangible and malignant. Fast as he went, however, the thing he feared kept up with him. Nothing in the woman's notion, of course. But one can't ignore even the slightest hint of murder. . . . Herded together . . . A nice six months . . .

CHAPTER III

DOCTOR CARY SIDESTEPS

THE following day brought the efficient Johnson a soul-shattering disappointment.

"By the way," Long informed him in the late afternoon, when he had inspected and approved the plans for the new bathroom, "I've decided that I must drop my hope of any upstairs service from you. It wouldn't be fair to you, nor to the rest. You'll have all you can handle. We must rig up some sort of quarters for Stevens. I'll be enough of a nuisance to you downstairs," he added kindly, as Johnson's facial disk showed his chagrin. "Can you find a room on the fourth floor for Stevens? That would be more convenient for us—if the women servants wouldn't mind. Stevens is a middle-aged man and very conventional," he smilingly ended.

The smile cheered Johnson. "We can manage it, sir. There's the fourth-floor room of Miss Chandler's maid, Nora. She'll be leaving, I suppose, unless the ladies want to keep her."

Long reflected briefly. The finances of the guests would not allow them to run to maids. Better let the girl go, but remain in touch with her for future use. Miss Chandler had somewhat conspicuously failed to

provide for Nora in her plans, though she had so generously remembered the girl in her will.

"I don't think they'll need her," he decided aloud. "And Nora's room will do nicely for Stevens. See to that end of it, will you, Johnson?" A bank-note passed from hand to hand and Johnson's manner melted still more. Mr. Long had always shown a generous disposition.

"I'll tell Miss Webb you said to give Nora a month's wages and let her go," Johnson volunteered. "Then we'll be ready for Mr. Stevens whenever he comes."

"I'll speak to Miss Webb, myself," Long amended. "I must see that we have Nora's address, wherever she is."

After that, of course, he had to send for Miss Webb, and he dreaded the interview. However, it passed off smoothly enough. The attractive face of the nurse wore an expression reminding him that she had done her duty, but she also made it clear that she had no intention of bringing up the subject which was in the foreground of their thoughts. He had to do that, himself, after they had indulged in a little verbal fencing.

"I suppose there's no reason why we should keep Nora any longer," he tentatively advanced.

"None whatever, unless there's some work for her to do."

"Is there?"

"Not that I know of, though a houseful of women can usually keep a maid busy."

"The women in this house can't afford a personal maid at present," Long ruled. Then, as Miss Webb waited in silence, he had to go to the point: "Is there any reason, connected with your suspicions, why we should keep Nora under observation?"

"None at all. Nora is a stupid and well-meaning girl, and her job had been a sinecure for six months. She's the sort of personal maid who is excellent in health but no good in sickness. She made Miss Chandler horribly nervous, so we kept her out of the sick-room. She'll be much better off away from this menagerie."

"All right. Give her a month's wages, warn her to keep us informed of her address, and tell her to come to my office if she needs any advance on her legacy."

"Very well, Mr. Long. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing just now, thanks."

He heard her go, heard the door close behind her. Then, strolling over to a window, he stared unseeingly at the outer world. The longer he looked forward to the coming half-year, the more, in one way, he disliked the vista. His impression that life was a pleasant affair was fading. Yet of course this whole poison scare might be the delusion old Cary considered it. However, he himself dared not assume that it was a delusion. Cary had no further responsibilities. Long had. He had made his decision after another reading of Catherine Chandler's letter.

Read in the light of Miss Webb's statement, that letter had impressed him. The new will lay sealed in

his office safe, and he had shaped his course of conduct on the letter. There was some satisfaction in the knowledge, a satisfaction now momentarily blurred by the suspicion that his first assistant, the highly efficient Miss Webb, had no flattering impression of his gifts as a leader. Well, he was not a criminal lawyer. If one were needed, Catherine should not have selected a conservative person whose specialty was the handling of estates.

Perhaps it was the brief interview with the nurse that had caused the phenomenon, but mingled now with his depression and the dread he could not shake off was a new-born sensation. He did not analyze it clearly, but there was excitement and a certain thrill in this situation. It had been a long time since anything out of the ordinary had interrupted the placid routine of his existence. It was good to know that he was still human enough, still sufficiently warm-blooded and mentally elastic, to feel that tingle of the senses at the prospect of action, perhaps even of danger.

Yet back of it all, like a substantial prop, stood his faith in Cary. Surely the doctor must be right. Long did not mean to let his nerves get the better of him as the woman's nerves had done. There had been inner excitement in her manner that morning, though she had been outwardly so cool. The excitement was understandable, of course. Catherine had kept all those around her under a heavy nervous strain, and Miss Webb had borne the worst of the tension. He understood that the night-nurse, Miss Connolly, had been

more fortunate, as the patient had usually had quiet nights. But he must look into that detail more closely, and right now. He had forgotten Miss Connolly. He rang the bell, and when Johnson responded, which he did with an alacrity suggesting that he had been lingering outside the door, he sent Miss Webb a message asking her to return to the library for a moment.

The room was now normal. It had been swept and aired, and through its windows the cold sunshine of a frosty day pierced its way. But to Long its atmosphere was still reminiscent of the heavy scent of flowers, of the presence of the silent figure that had lain there. He was glad when the opening door purred along the polished floor and Miss Webb came in again. He watched her as she crossed the room, taking the opportunity to give her a closer scrutiny than he had yet turned on her.

His first impression was one of surprise. She was really a superb-looking creature. He decided that she could not be more than twenty-nine or thirty, but she combined with her professional manner an air of entire sophistication. She held herself well, too, walking with head and shoulders back and the stride of a college girl on the golf-links. Possibly she had been a college girl. Her quiet assurance and her vocabulary suggested it. She still wore her white uniform. It was a becoming one and the small cap sat at an almost jaunty angle on her copper-colored hair. She had a taking little mole at the right of her left eyebrow.

He did not understand a sudden change in her till

he realized that she was smiling as she came toward him and that the smile was as friendly as it was brilliant. He experienced a surprising sense of relief as he returned the smile. The suggestion of tension in her had departed.

"Sorry to call you back," he apologized when they were seated, and there was a new note of cordiality in his agreeable voice. "I forgot to ask you some questions I had in mind about Miss Connolly. Has she left?"

"Oh, yes. She came back for the funeral, but she left, professionally, the morning after Miss Chandler died."

Miss Webb stopped smiling and became professional again, as if the question had been an invocation.

"Was that wise?"

"It's customary. There's no reason why the trained nurse should stay on. I should have left the next morning, myself—perhaps even that night—if it hadn't been for Miss Chandler's instructions."

He put his next question almost reluctantly:

"Had you reason to think that Miss Connolly suspected anything was wrong?"

Hope Webb's auburn eyebrows rose.

"Miss Connolly," she said succinctly, "would hardly have suspected that anything was wrong if some one had entered the room and killed her patient with an ax. She was married two days after she left here, and she hasn't thought of anything but that marriage for months. If Miss Chandler had been restless and

uncomfortable at night, I shouldn't have dared leave her to Miss Connolly. But fortunately she needed very little attention then, so Miss Connolly sat beside her bed and no one was the worse for it."

"What time did Miss Connolly go on duty?" Long asked.

"At six. She gave the patient her supper, and then read aloud to her till Miss Chandler took her sleeping powder, usually about half-past nine, and dropped off. Miss Connolly is a nice girl," Miss Webb added, "and she comes from one of our best training-schools. I'm not criticizing her at all. I suppose her state of mind was natural in such conditions. She went through the motions of looking after her patient, and she did them well enough from force of habit. But she has been living in a dream, and the only time I saw her really awake was when she heard that Miss Chandler had left her five hundred dollars. It seems that five hundred dollars will just furnish her new living-room."

Long laughed softly and rose. "We must see that she gets it without delay."

The nurse rose, too, and he faced her with a suggestion of friendly interest. She was far more human in this interview than he had yet seen her, and the phenomenon interested him.

"You haven't changed your mind?" he tentatively inquired. "You seem so alert and cheerful all of a sudden that I wondered—"

"Not a bit of it." Miss Webb spoke crisply. Then she smiled again. "But I'm not going to go around

looking and acting like a sleuth in fiction," she confided. "I made that decision after my first talk with you. Another thing is certain, too. I'm not going to let this situation get on my nerves. It might, very easily, if one thought too much about it."

Long nodded. He had discovered that himself. "I see you're still clinging to your uniform."

"Yes. And I want to keep on doing it. It's the outfit I'm used to, and I feel most comfortable in it. But Miss Chandler told me to take all my meals with the family—she made a strong point of that—and I'm wondering about dinner dress. I suppose I ought to change at night. That will mean a few evening gowns."

"And you haven't them? Then I think we ought to supply them. That certainly shouldn't be part of your expenses." His look sharpened as he watched her face. He must be cautious in the matter of expenses. "How many evening gowns shall you need?" he asked in a severely businesslike tone. "Two or three?"

"Three will be enough. You'd better tell me how much I can spend on them and I'll keep within the amount."

"I'm not an authority on the subject. What would you suggest?"

"Two hundred dollars. I'll get very simple gowns, but I'll need slippers and silk stockings to match them, and a scarf or two."

"Two hundred will be satisfactory. Shall I give you a check?"

"No. I'll pay for the things and give you the receipted bills as vouchers."

She was certainly efficient, but there was an amused look in her brown eyes, as if she had observed man's instinctive retreat when the money question comes up. He wondered whether Catherine Chandler had liked her. Perhaps she had toward the end. One could never be sure of anything with Catherine. But certainly she had trusted the nurse, and it behooved him to follow that example.

Yet he continued to ponder the matter as he entered his roadster and drove toward Doctor Cary's office. The trouble with a mess of this kind, he reflected—the sort of mess he was in—was that it made a man suspicious of every one and everything. He'd be up to his neck in suspicion in another week, and he loathed the prospect. He certainly must not begin by distrusting Miss Webb. According to the wishes of his late client, Miss Webb was to be in control of the purchasing. She was really to act as housekeeper, and at the same time to be an intimate member of the family circle. The family circle wouldn't be able to follow the reasons for that, but it was easy enough for him to do so. One other person might suspect the reason; the person for whom Catherine Chandler had spread her net . . . *if* she had spread one. And there he was again, back at the starting-point.

Long sighed and took the wheel in a tighter grasp. Then, resolutely, he detached his mind from Hope Webb. He had made a special appointment with Cary

and he hoped the old chap wouldn't forget it. He, Long, would keep his roadster in the Chandler garage and drive back and forth to Waterford. . . . It might take more time than the express-trains, but it would be more comfortable. He loathed trains. . . . He was justified in making himself physically as comfortable as possible during the coming six months, since every indication pointed to considerable mental discomfort. . . .

And this job would play the mischief with his law practice. He wouldn't be able to keep his mind on anything else. However, he need not bother about that. Catherine herself had fixed his retainer, and it was far in advance of what he would have asked her. He could turn a lot of his own work over to a legal friend. He must earn Catherine's big fee, and there was only one way to do that. . . . A deep sigh broke from the lips of the harassed lawyer. The sound startled him and he uttered a mirthless laugh.

"If I'm like this now, I wonder what I'll be six months from now," he muttered, and grimaced at the thought.

He found Doctor Cary waiting in his office and looking impatient. Long was ten minutes late, and Cary mentioned this with pain as they perfunctorily shook hands. Long apologized and went at once to the point of his visit.

"I wanted to ask you a few questions about Miss Chandler's death," he began. "It was rather unexpected at the end, wasn't it?"

"It was, and it wasn't." Cary irritably shook his big white head. "She might have lived on for awhile, or she might have died sooner than she did. One never knows how it's going to be in those cases."

"But wasn't it a fact, Doctor, that you and the specialists you called in had practically given her another year or two?"

"We held out hopes of it. She had amazing vitality. At the same time, none of us was surprised when she went. Look here!" He leaned forward in his swivel chair and put a wrinkled forefinger with a swollen first joint on Long's knee. His office hours were over, but the two men were in Cary's book-lined consulting room, the doctor at his office desk, Long before him on the anxious seat so many patients must have occupied. "Has that fool nurse said anything to you that's made you ask these questions?" the doctor brusquely demanded.

Long met steadily the keen old eyes.

"Is she a fool nurse?" he asked, and something in the tone and the quiet courtesy of the younger man steadied the older one and banished his momentary irritation. He sat back in his chair and his expression changed.

"I shouldn't have said that," he admitted. "She's a good nurse, one of the best I've seen in a sick-room. She's all right as long as she sticks to her job. But when she gets away from that and goes in for suspicions and diagnosis, she loses her head like the rest of them."

"Then you're convinced, Doctor, that Miss Chandler's death was due to her disease and to no other cause?"

"Of course I am."

"And there was nothing—no incident or incidents at any time, except Miss Webb's report to you—that suggested anything wrong, unusual, criminal?"

"Of course there wasn't." But now the absolute certainty had left Cary's manner. His big face looked confused. "You don't mean that you are taking that stuff seriously," he added.

"I'm inclined to think, from her actions and a letter she wrote me, that Miss Chandler herself may have shared Miss Webb's suspicion," Long confessed.

"Nonsense!"

"It may be nonsense. I hope to God it is. But it's what brought me here to-day." As Cary did not reply to this, the lawyer added: "Certainly she was worried about something a few days before her death, and you know she changed her will and all her plans almost at the last minute. How long before Miss Chandler's death did you last see her?"

"About two hours."

"Was she conscious?"

"No."

Long rose. He was getting nowhere, and he had an irritating suspicion that the old doctor was keeping something from him.

"There's a simple way of settling the question," he said, slowly. "Any dose strong enough to cause her

death would certainly leave some trace, though Miss Webb thinks there wouldn't be much if the poison she suspects was used. I suppose you'd have no objections to a post mortem, even at this late date."

Doctor Cary's big body moved irritably in the roomy swivel chair.

"No, but she would," he jerked out.

Long sat down again. "What do you mean by that?"

"The last time I saw Miss Chandler conscious," said Cary, with a sudden air of making a clean breast of it, "was twenty-four hours before her death. She told me she didn't want any post mortem. Her disease was an interesting one, and I thought she was afraid we'd want some exploratory cutting. Of course we hadn't considered any such thing, as I pointed out to her. I decided when I thought it over that possibly she had heard something about p.m.'s. Any layman who knows anything about them has a horror of them, and quite justifiably, too. Bodies aren't handled as the families would handle them," he added grimly, "and there isn't much of them left when the doctors get through. I know one trained nurse who was knocked out for days by seeing an autopsy. But that's neither here nor there. It's quite on the cards that Catherine Chandler had a horror of post mortems. She isn't the first patient I've had who has ruled against being cut up. On the other hand . . ."

"Yes?" Long prompted. Probably the tone was too official, too eager. Certainly it changed Cary's mood.

"Perhaps the Webb woman frightened her," he

snapped. "In the condition Catherine Chandler was in, the mental state of some one close to her all the time might easily have affected her."

"Then you would oppose a post mortem now?"

"I'd consider it damn foolishness, as well as strictly against the wishes of my patient," the old doctor ended more mildly.

Long got up again, this time with finality.

"Doctor," he said emphasizing every word, "forgive me for my persistence, but this matter seems to me important. Are you absolutely convinced that Catherine Chandler died from disease and not from poisoning?"

Cary rose, but he did not face his visitor. Instead he looked past him, as if considering the question. Nevertheless he answered it in a tone of entire conviction:

"I am."

"That's very reassuring," Long said with a quick breath of relief. "But why did she think something unusual was going on? Why did she tell Miss Webb to keep her mouth shut?"

Cary snorted.

"That was good advice to give the Webb woman almost any time," he said. "She talks too damn much. See what she's done to you!"

"She has simply made me wonder why Miss Chandler was suspicious and afraid. I wish you'd explain that. Or do you even admit that she was?"

"She may have been suspicious," Cary conceded.

"I can see that her request to me suggests that. She must have known we'd never dream of holding a p.m. without her permission. But if she had any suspicion," he added firmly, "it was put into her mind, in one way or another, by the Webb girl. And you can take my word that no one poisoned her."

"That's your final conclusion?"

"It is."

"Would she . . . could she . . . have poisoned herself?"

"Do you really think, knowing her as you did, that that's possible?"

"No."

"Neither do I."

"But, Doctor, just for the sake of argument, what do you think of this theory: Is it possible that Catherine Chandler suspected that she was poisoned, and decided that since she had to die anyway in a year or so it wasn't a matter to make a sensation over?"

Cary laughed shortly.

"You and I have known the late Catherine for a good many years," he dryly reminded his visitor. "Did she strike you as the type of woman who'd let some one poison her and get away with it?"

"No. But she might have had her own way of handling the matter. She was capable of that."

"She was capable of anything," Cary conceded. "But in this case you're barking up the wrong tree."

The interview ended with this tribute to their late friend, and Long returned to his roadster and drove

thoughtfully back to the city through the early twilight. Notwithstanding Cary's stanch adherence to his guns, he believed the old doctor was less sure of his ground than he pretended to be. But at least the talk had settled one point. The testimony of her physician certainly justified her lawyer in following Catherine Chandler's last wishes. He was glad to leave the legal responsibility of that action on Cary's venerable but vigorous shoulders.

CHAPTER IV

NAOMI GETS A MESSAGE

MISS CHANDLER'S guests were dining. It was their first evening together in their new home, and though the dinner was perfect, representing the combined efforts of four master minds, the occasion could hardly be considered a social success. Long admitted this as he looked around the table.

Concerning the matter of the meal itself, he had taken a definite stand with Miss Webb.

"I'm not sure how much you know about food aside from its dietetic value," he began with his usual suavity, "but it seems to me important that this family should have good meals. We have an excellent cook here and a superfine butler, and all we need is a little imagination in the ordering. If, in the beginning, you will let me make some suggestions—or Johnson can do it if you prefer—" he added as Miss Webb's expression subtly changed, "you'll soon get the right idea of what we want and then you can go on alone. I'm assuming," he added with his likable smile, "that planning the meals in a house like this is a little outside of your experience."

Miss Webb had admitted that it was. She had also proved hospitable to suggestions. The menu he gave

her was a good one and the cook had done justice to it. But there was constraint at the table, due largely, Long realized, to that eloquently empty chair at its head, partly to the fatigue and excitement of packing and moving, and most of all to a nerve tension that obviously existed among the guests.

Only Mrs. Price seemed at ease. Long suspected that when she had taken time to think, it had been a definite relief to her to be assured of good food and lodging for herself and her daughters for half a year. He was greatly relieved by her change of manner, and decided that he understood it. In addition to the prospect of living without much expense for six months, Anne Price, worldling to her finger-tips, probably loved an atmosphere of wealth and luxury. Despite its mid-Victorian setting the heavy affluence of the Chandler dining-room appealed to her, and her beauty-loving senses basked in the æsthetic values of its soft lights, its flowers, and the blazing logs in its big fireplace. She ate none of the perfect dinner, but she was obviously calling on all her social gifts to amuse Long.

Seated at the end of the table opposite Miss Chandler's empty chair, and with Mrs. Price at his right, the lawyer met her overtures more than half-way. He had always liked and admired Anne Price, and to-night her rather faded blond beauty had quickened into something that almost stirred his pulses. He remembered that she had married very young. She could not be more than forty now and in this hour she looked

thirty. There was even color in her cheeks—possibly rouge, but it was very becoming.

Naomi Sabin also was a lovely thing to see, and Miss Webb, seated between Henry Hutchins and George Dixon, was almost flamboyantly handsome in a water-green evening gown that did not suffer by comparison with the clothes of the women around her.

Thus far, however, she plainly felt no obligation to contribute to the gaiety of the occasion, and the rest of the young folks were silent and almost sullen. With the exception of Catherine none of them spoke often save Henry Hutchins; and when Henry spoke Long rather wished he wouldn't. The young man had a ponderous manner, an appalling lack of humor, and an obsession on first editions. He discoursed to Naomi on this pet topic, but Long suspected that the girl hardly heard what he said, though she answered him courteously enough.

The men did not linger in the dining-room after the women left. There was nothing to drink, and they had not yet grown used to that empty chair. They knew they could smoke in the living-room, where already the girls were setting the example.

"Thank God there's no empty chair standing around in here," George muttered as he lit his first cigarette.

Long sighed.

"There is," he confessed, "and I forgot to speak of it. It's the big Chinese chair you're sitting in, Naomi. It was brought down from Miss Chandler's

room, by her orders, and it's to stand at the right of the fireplace, empty from now on. Evidently she wanted us to have a strong sense of her presence whenever we are together," he ended, his eyes on Naomi's paling face as she sprang from the chair.

"I beg Aunt C. C.'s pardon," Naomi said breathlessly, and dropped into the wing-chair Henry hastened to offer her, as if it were a refuge. There was a moment of silence, which George Dixon broke.

"This passion of Auntie's for our society is something new," he said quietly. "Every time Ethel drove me here to see her I got the feeling that the old girl wanted to turn the hose on me, and the last time I called—Gee! I wish I hadn't thought of that now!" he added with a shiver. Catherine broke in so suddenly that Mrs. Price's thin body jerked in its chair.

"Mr. Long," she began in her vibrant young voice, "there's something we all want to know. And now that we're comfortably smoking together around the fire, it seems a good time to ask about it. The family," she added with a smile, "has asked me to be spokesman."

"Speak on, my dear," Long invited. His dinner had been perfect and his cigar was good. His mood was peaceful. He had expected questions and though he would have preferred to answer them a little later, this was probably as good a time as any.

"We've been talking things over among ourselves," Catherine confessed. "Of course you knew we'd do that. It's clear enough that we're here on probation,

all of us. Evidently we're to follow some plan of Aunt C. C.'s and to stand some sort of tests. But don't you think that in simple fairness we ought to know what the tests are? And if there are rules and regulations, as I suppose there must be, oughtn't we to know them, too?"

Long nodded, looking thoughtfully at the burning end of the cigar he had taken from his lips and was holding in his fingers. He knew that the eyes of every one in the room were on him, but he could not look around that expectant circle, could not meet those searching eyes. In that moment Catherine Chandler's plan seemed to him monstrous, a hideous travesty of justice. She was subjecting seven persons to a six-months inquisition based solely on what might be wholly unfounded suspicion that one of them was a criminal. It was an atrocious thing to do.

He forced himself to the issue before him.

"I wish I could answer as frankly as you've just spoken, Catherine," he began. He had decided that it would simplify matters and promote a friendly informality if he addressed all the young things by their first names. "But the truth is," he went on, "I'm almost as much in the dark about this business as the rest of you. I've told you about all I know, and we'll have to use our imaginations on the remainder. It will give them something to work on," he added with a pinched smile.

No one made any comment on this and he continued:

"You are here on probation. Life here is a test. And (I've got to talk straight if I talk at all) it's plain enough that Miss Chandler changed her will because in the last three months of her life she had discovered facts about some or all of you that disturbed her. You must know what these discoveries were."

The hush in the room was painful. He hurried on:

"Keep in mind that Miss Chandler made the change of plan as easy for you as she could. You are her guests for six months. Your household expenses will be met. You will be very comfortable physically. She made generous appropriation for the running cost of the establishment, and left it to my discretion to increase the estimate if it proves insufficient. All that is satisfactory, assuming that you're willing to give half a year of your lives to her experiment; and you evidently are, for you're here. On the other hand we've got to admit that in a way you're somewhat like prisoners. Since you ask for the rules, I may as well tell you now that according to the set of rules accompanying her letter, and which I wasn't to give you till we were settled, no one is allowed to spend a single night out of the house except in case of serious illness which calls for hospital treatment."

"May I ask, sir," George Dixon said with sudden gravity, "if that last rule applies to you and Miss Webb as well as to us?"

"It does, coming in the form of a request."

"And to the servants?"

"No. The servants can come and go as they like."

"They'll all be on double salary, and all except Nora lose their legacies if they leave before the six months are up."

"I suppose," Catherine Price ironically murmured, "we're allowed our evenings out."

"Certainly; but only till midnight. Every one must be in by twelve."

"Just like Cinderella."

"That rule is going to cramp your style a bit, Cath," George Dixon grinned, trying to play up to her.

"A lot of bartenders will have an easier time from twelve to three every morning if you're not at large, George," Lily Price muttered. Mrs. Price said, "Lily!" in an absent voice. Her eyes were on Long's face.

"What's the penalty if one isn't in by twelve?" Catherine Price asked, abruptly dropping the effort at cheerfulness.

Long tried to answer lightly, but his voice showed tension. He was increasingly annoyed with Catherine Chandler.

"Outer darkness," he told them. "Johnson will lock up at midnight. No one can enter the house after that, and any one who is late more than three times is dropped from the group and must go and live elsewhere at his or her own expense."

George Dixon whistled softly. He was entirely sober, a condition, Long assumed, not frequent with him at this hour.

"Mr. Long—" it was Henry who asked this question, and for once the lawyer welcomed the sound of his

voice—"can't you give us any better reasons why Aunt Catherine did this amazing thing?"

"She gives them, herself, in a way," the lawyer reminded him. "Don't you remember? She says that she considers it vitally important for the members of her family to know and understand one another better than they do. She wants you all together in her home, to work out certain problems."

Naomi spoke for the first time:

"Did she say *a* problem, or problems?"

"She said problems."

"But—you won't mind our frankness—just what is your job and Miss Webb's?" Henry brought out.

"We're partly observers and timekeepers," Long admitted. "Partly, perhaps, we're here as a sort of leaven to the family group. A housekeeper was needed, and evidently Miss Chandler had faith in Miss Webb. And my own position as executor and trustee is in itself enough excuse for my being here."

"In other words," Naomi said quietly, "you two are merely 'innocent bystanders.'"

It was a chance remark, Long decided, but it startled him into a quick glance at Miss Webb. He met her look. She had been surprised into an eye-flash at him.

"Why should you and Miss Webb have to be prisoners after midnight? We can't help feeling," Catherine contributed, "that there's something very queer back of it all. We think we ought to know what it is."

"Yes," said Mrs. Price, suddenly looking ten years

older, and speaking so sharply that Long looked at her in surprise, "we ought to know what it is."

There was a definite tension in the circle, and he decided to put an end to it. He knocked the ashes from the end of his cigar, restored the cigar to his lips, leaned back, and drew in a satisfying mouthful of smoke.

"See here," he said cajolingly when he had exhaled it: "why not be philosophical about this business? We know that Catherine Chandler had her own way of doing things. We know that she was impulsive and at times erratic. It seems clear that she thought a quiet half-year would be an extremely good thing for most of you. She knew—again I must be very frank—that many of you were burning the candle at both ends. She had heard about heavy drinking among you. She knew that some of you danced most of the night and slept most of the day. She didn't approve of that sort of thing.

"Perhaps she thought you'd make ducks and drakes of her money. Perhaps she thought you'd disgrace the family. She appears to have discovered a lot of things about you she didn't like. She may have decided that six months of quiet living and early hours might pull you up and make you over—to say nothing of the suggestion of her own continued presence and the beautiful example of plain living and high thinking Miss Webb and I are here to furnish," he ended grimly, for by this time Mr. Long was very sorry for himself.

"That's all right," Henry Hutchins unexpectedly observed, "but how about me? I don't drink all night. I've got a regular job and I work at it. And how about Naomi? She was running a chicken farm. That's a fairly innocent occupation, and she tells me she was usually in bed by ten and up by six. How about Aunt Anne?"

Miss Webb spoke for the first time, her eyes on a handkerchief in the corner of which she was embroidering a small monogram. She was sitting a little distance from the circle, in a chair beside a reading-lamp, but it was now clear that she had missed none of the talk around her.

"Mrs. Price," she said quietly, "has had to keep very late hours. Miss Chandler often spoke of that. She was very much disturbed lately by the condition of Mrs. Price's health."

Anne Price cast a look at the speaker so vindictive that it actually made Long catch his breath. Then she leaned forward in her chair and extended her thin hands toward the fire. The hands shook and she drew them back.

"I am very nervous," she said in a choked voice. "I admit it. I don't think it's much of a secret from any of you."

Henry Hutchins followed the line of his argument like the self-centered young man he was.

"Admitting that," he persisted again, "how about Naomi and me? In many ways I don't mind this arrangement in the least. It saves me a lot of money that

I can spend on my collection. And," he added as an obvious afterthought and with a glance at Naomi which she did not meet, "I'll enjoy the company. But I object to being put into a position I don't understand. I hate to 'go it blind' as we're all doing. And Naomi—"

"Naomi," that young person interrupted concisely, "will speak for herself. Thank you very much, Henry, but I don't in the least mind leaving my chicken farm and living here. The farm wasn't paying, anyway. I shall be glad to have myself off my hands for six months. As to this experiment, I think I know perfectly well what it means."

Henry immediately asked what she meant by that, and Mrs. Price straightened in her chair and turned a strange look on the girl.

Naomi shook her head. "I'm not saying any more about it. Perhaps I'm wrong. Anyway, the guess of any of you is as good as mine."

"All that's that," Ethel Dixon said, trying to speak indifferently. "How about giving us the rest of the rules?"

"There aren't many," Long said. "The important one, next to the midnight rule, is the one requiring each of you to make a visit to Miss Chandler's room this week and sit there alone for half an hour. That's not so odd as it may seem. It's evidently merely a part of her plan to have you all feel in close personal touch with her. Naturally, you will feel her influence more strongly there than anywhere else."

"And it will give me a chance to paste in some new book-plates," Henry Hutchins suggested.

"No, it won't," Long smiled. "You're expected to give the time to your hostess, and to quiet thought."

"I wonder what Lil's brain will do," George Dixon mused aloud, "when it tries to think."

"Funny," said Catherine, with her hard little yelp of laughter. "Every one else was just wondering what George would do when thinking time came."

"Children," sighed Mrs. Price. The temporary vivacity of the dinner hour had wholly left her. She drooped wearily in her chair, her fair graying hair against its high back, her face livid, her dark-circled eyes on the blazing logs. An hour ago she had looked thirty. Now she was an astringent prophecy of what her daughter Lily might be thirty years hence.

"Why the devil did Aunt C. C. want us to go to her room and sit there in solitary state?" George muttered. "With all due respect to the old girl, that's going to be an infernal nuisance."

Miss Webb spoke again.

"Seeing guests one at a time was one of Miss Chandler's fixed ideas," she said. "As long as I was with her I never knew her to have several visitors in the room, except once, and that was a matter of business. She usually said it tired her too much, but once she confessed that it was really because she never 'got at' more than one person."

"What the devil did she want to get at?" George almost groaned. "She was always trying to get at

something in me that wasn't there. Do you and Mr. Long have to make these calls too, Miss Webb?"

"No."

Long amplified the terse admission:

"Only members of the family make that pilgrimage. As to why she wanted it, which was your first question, perhaps your aunt felt that you weren't thinking enough, weren't communing with your own souls, as the phrase goes. Or perhaps she wanted you to understand her better, as you may do if you think about her more. By the way, she seems to have planned to have each of you get some kind of message from her during the visit. Miss Webb knows more about that than I do." He saw them exchange glances and he looked at his watch, eager to get away from the subject. "Any one ready for a game of billiards?" he tentatively inquired.

There was a moment's silence, which Henry broke:

"I'll play, sir, if you'll make allowances. I'm pretty bad at it."

"No, I'll play; and I'm pretty good at it," Ethel Dixon briskly announced.

As she and Long started toward the door the voice of Miss Webb stopped them.

"How about the little upstairs pilgrimage?" the nurse was asking. "I suppose some one ought to go to-night. Which one is it to be?"

The group hesitated, its members again glancing uncertainly at one another. There was a long silence, broken only by the fretful whir of an old clock pre-

paring to announce the hour. Then Naomi stood up.

"I'm perfectly willing to go first and get it over," she crisply announced.

Miss Webb folded the handkerchief and rose with a purposeful air.

"I'll go with you," she told Naomi.

"And turn on the lights? Thanks. I'm not sure I know just where they are."

"There won't be any lights," Miss Webb placidly mentioned. "That's why I suggested going up and getting you settled."

"Oh . . . I didn't know that." Naomi spoke blankly and the rest looked startled.

"Do you mean to say," Lily Price jerked out, "that we've got to go up into that vault and sit there without a blim?"

"Yes. Didn't you know that?"

"No. I don't think any of us did. What's the big idea? It's . . . it's . . ." Miss Price's vocabulary was not large. She drew on it now with the usual result. "It's simply beastly!" she finished.

"Does 'ums guilty conscience prick 'um in the dark?" George asked with a hollow effort at lightness.

"No, it doesn't. But the thing is so damned weird."

Miss Webb and Naomi left the room. Long went with Ethel to the billiard room, which was across the hall from the dining-room. He did not speak of the little vagary of his client which had just been discussed. Neither did Ethel refer to it as the two chalked their cues, but he knew her mind was full of it.

In the upper hall Miss Webb stood on the threshold of Miss Chandler's room, holding in her hand the knob of the yawning door. A thin line of light pierced the darkness within.

"If you don't mind waiting in the hall a few moments," the nurse remarked, "I'll go and get things ready. As Mr. Long suggested, 'there's a reason' for all this, and some preparation is necessary. If I'd known in advance who was to come to-night, I could have made it this afternoon. I'll find that out hereafter."

She crossed the threshold and hesitated, looking back at the girl. Something in Naomi's face must have touched her, for she returned and spoke quickly and kindly.

"This may give you a little jolt for a moment," she said, "but you'll realize immediately just what it is. Remember this: no one knows anything about the message you get except yourself. I make the adjustment, but I have no idea what you'll hear. I'll call you in a minute."

She reëntered the room and the door closed behind her. Left alone in the brightly lighted hall, Naomi walked to its wide front window and stared out into the night. It was cool and frosty. The stars looked big and very near. Her heart was beating faster than usual. She quieted her singing nerves and tried to fix her thoughts on the pageant of the sky. The inverted chair of Cassiopeia hung low before her. Superb Orion was stalking up over the horizon with Sirius at his heels.

Miss Webb spoke behind her and she started.

"Sorry I frightened you," said the nurse.

"You didn't."

The other waived the point.

"It's just five minutes past ten," she mentioned in her cool voice. "If you will get into the chaise longue and make yourself comfortable, I'll close the door and come back for you in half an hour. Naturally, you won't be able to follow the time."

"Do I have to sit in that particular chair?"

"Yes."

"There will be some light from somewhere, won't there?—through the windows, or a transom?"

"No, the transoms are covered and the windows have thick curtains. It will be pretty black in here," the nurse said cheerfully. "Evidently Miss Chandler didn't want anything to distract you while you are getting the message. You won't mind?" she added, with a sudden keen look at the girl's face.

"No . . . not really. But I don't pretend to like it. However, of course I understand it. Aunt Catherine thought that if we had a light here we'd read instead of thinking about her."

"Which is exactly what most of you would have done," Miss Webb agreed. "You heard Mr. Hutchins's remark about his book-plates. Now, make the best of it. I'll be in my room, on the other side of the bathroom, so I'll hear you if you call."

"Why should I call?" Naomi's shining black head was high. She flushed hotly.

"You might be nervous."

"I shan't be; but thanks very much, just the same. I'll make myself comfortable."

The girl crossed the threshold into the room, dimly illumined by the hall light entering through the still open door, and settled down into the chaise longue, which stood directly facing her. Her manner was almost defiant. Miss Webb passed into the hall.

"All right?" she asked from the threshold.

"All right, of course . . . thanks."

The door closed, and blackness settled upon the room and its occupant. Naomi stared into that blackness with a shaking heart. She had a horror of intense darkness. The room was as quiet as it was dark . . . save for a slight purring sound. Then a voice spoke so abruptly that she half leaped from the chair.

"My dear Naomi," it began. "It isn't often that I've had the pleasure of talking to any of you when you were unable to interrupt. I have it now, and I'm going to make the most of it."

Naomi relaxed in the chaise longue, exhaling a shaken breath. Aunt C. C.'s voice. A record, of course—a phonograph record! And the little purring, scratching sound was the needle on the disk, the disk Aunt C. C. had had especially made for this half-hour. How amazing the reproduction was—that deep familiar voice, with its unmistakable modulations, its incisiveness, its occasional rasping quality! . . .

"Listening is about the hardest thing you young folks do nowadays," the voice went on. "I haven't often been allowed to finish a sentence addressed to

any one of you, though I admit that you and Henry are not so bad in that respect as the rest of them. Still, I rather like the idea of a short monologue which none of you can interrupt. Perhaps it isn't quite fair. Perhaps some other things I'm doing are not quite fair. I'm past worrying about that. I had thought I was past worrying about anything except my health, but lately I've had reason to change my mind. I'm worrying about you, and about the rest of the hapless clan that have my blood in their veins. I'm worrying about you all. But it's you I'm worrying about when I dictate this record, Naomi. Pull yourself up to it, child, for I'm going to tell you why. . . ."

At the end of a little more than half an hour Nicholas Long was summoned from the billiard room into the hall. The summons came from Miss Webb, who was waiting outside. She motioned him to close the door behind him as he emerged, and then stood looking at him with an odd expression.

"That girl fainted in there," she brusquely announced.

"What girl? Where?" Long's mind was on the billiard game from which he had been called away at an interesting moment. Ethel Dixon had demonstrated that her tribute to her own skill was justified. He blinked uncertainly at the nurse.

"Miss Sabin, of course. She fainted in Miss Chandler's room. I found her unconscious when I went in there just now to tell her the time was up."

Long stared at her. "Fainted! But why?"

"Nervousness, I suppose. Some folks can't stand pitch-darkness very long, and that room is as black as a pocket. She's all right now," she added as his look changed.

"Did she say anything?"

"She was a trifle hysterical; accused me of having forgotten her. Thought she had been there for hours. Then she begged me not to tell the others about the faint. I told her I'd have to mention it to you, but of course I am not going to speak of it to any one else."

She turned to leave, but his voice stopped her.

"I don't approve of this sort of thing," he brought out heavily.

Her eyes met him. "You want the truth, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then we've got to keep on looking for it, and it won't help the situation for us to lose our nerve at the start. Will it?"

"No," he said slowly. "No, I suppose it won't."

She left at that, but Long did not immediately go back to resume his game. Instead he stood motionless, watching the nurse as she swung along the hall. He had made some more discoveries about Miss Webb. She had said that she would not go around looking like a sleuth, but she was not keeping that vow. She was looking like a sleuth to-night—like a shining-eyed and triumphant amateur sleuth who had just discovered a clue. His second discovery had followed

close on the first. She was not trusting him with her clues.

Long nodded to her retreating back. All right, let her keep them to herself. He had one or two things up his own sleeve.

CHAPTER V

A LATE CALL

NAOMI did not immediately return to the group in the living-room, though Miss Webb had urged her to do so.

"They're playing bridge," the nurse added, "and it will occupy your mind and help to calm you before you go to sleep."

"Why should I need calming?" Miss Sabin coldly inquired. "I am simply tired and run down. It hasn't been an easy thing to wind up a chicken farm and move to another home inside of a week . . . not to speak of readjusting one's life."

"Do you think fatigue would account for your faint?"

"Why wouldn't it? I've fainted before."

"Oh, have you? If it's a habit, perhaps that explains it," the nurse agreed. "But as it evidently wasn't a pleasant experience, don't you think it would be a good plan to have a rubber of bridge before you go to bed?"

Naomi hesitated.

"They'll ask all sorts of questions," she muttered.

"Why should they? And if they do, you needn't

tell them anything. But probably they aren't attaching any importance to this visit. They have no reason to think it was unpleasant, aside from the uncanny sensation one might have in a dead person's room in the dark. Besides, they're interested in the game."

"How many of them are in there?"

"Five. Mrs. Price and her daughters and Mr. Dixon are playing, and Mr. Hutchins is looking on."

"Then they don't need me, and my appearance would turn on Henry's conversational spigot. Later I may go in and watch them," and Naomi strolled away.

When she appeared in the living-room ten minutes later, the four at the card-table merely glanced up at her entrance and did not speak. It was an exciting moment. George Dixon, who was a brilliant but rather erratic player, had just doubled a no-trump bid by Mrs. Price, and now, under Naomi's rather vague observation, he triumphantly vindicated his action. Then he jumped up and offered Naomi his chair.

"You play and I'll watch," he suggested. Naomi shook her head.

"I'll watch another game or so. Then I'll see how they're getting on in the billiard room, and after that I'll go to bed," she decided. "I'm getting sleepy."

The question she had dreaded came.

"How did you enjoy your call on Aunt C. C.?" Lily Price asked while she was dealing the cards.

"Lily! Please don't speak in that way!" Mrs. Price said with sudden sharpness.

"I should have preferred some light in the room,"

Naomi had decided to tell them as much as she could.

Lily stopped dealing. All the eyes around the table were immediately fastened on Naomi.

"By Jove, that's so! How did it feel to sit there in the dark and meditate on Aunt C. C.'s virtues?" Lily asked with interest.

"I'll bet some of them escaped her memory," Catherine remarked; and Lily, whose laugh was like her sister's, yelped perfunctorily as she resumed the deal.

"Tell us as much as you can about it, Naomi," Catherine urged.

"Oh, well—" Naomi watched them closely as she spoke—"it really amounts to half an hour in a dark cell. Miss Webb trots off and leaves one in a room without a ray of light and then comes back and plucks one like a lovely flower when the time is up."

George whistled softly, but the faces of the others were masks. Mrs. Price put down the hand she had just picked up.

"I wish you'd finish the rubber for me, Naomi," she said faintly. "I've had a hard day, and if you children will excuse me I'll go to bed."

Naomi slipped into the vacant chair as her aunt rose, and Henry hastened to open the door for the older woman.

"You upset her, Naomi," he reproached her, as he returned to the card-table, and George added:

"It's time we realized that the plans our dear aunt has made for our enjoyment here won't stand the test of general family conversation."

"I suppose we oughtn't to be discussing my experience up there, anyway. But Aunt Anne's got to go through something like it in a few days," Naomi said. "You all have, so you might as well know that it isn't pleasant."

"Mother won't mind the darkness," Catherine Price philosophically contributed. "She loves it. Her own bedroom is pitch-black at night. Miss Webb may find Mother peacefully asleep when she comes for her, and as Lily likes the darkness too, she'll probably get in some pleasant naps. But I'd like to know," she added abruptly as she sorted her hand, "just what Aunt C. C.'s idea was."

"I think I know," Naomi muttered.

"So do I," said George, with a sudden edge on his pleasant voice. "And a damned nasty idea it is. But for God's sake don't let's talk about it. Let's play cards."

No one around the table had ever before heard George Dixon speak in that tone, but no one commented on the phenomenon. The game went on. Henry Hutchins laid down the book in which he had seemed absorbed while the little discussion continued.

"I think I'll watch the billiards a while," he murmured and strolled out of the room.

In the billiard room a little later Nicholas Long revised his first judgment of Henry Hutchins. That young man was a trifle heavy, but he was neither slow nor unintelligent and the game Ethel persuaded him to play and of which he himself had spoken so

slightingly was very nearly as good as her own. Both the young things were skilful and imperturbable players, and Long, who had begged for a rest on the plea that his old bones were getting stiff, enjoyed watching them. The episode in Miss Chandler's room, he had dismissed from his mind with one reservation. Some persons, he knew, had a horror of entire darkness. If Naomi belonged to that type he must save her from another such strain. An "executor and trustee" had to show some common sense even if a client had none. He must see to it that on Naomi's next visit to Catherine's room, if she went again, there was at least a blim of light from somewhere. . . .

The reflection started his brain on a now familiar, dreary round. What had Catherine meant by writing that anything that happened was "up to" her and not to the young folks? Probably it was merely a repetition of the fear she had tacitly expressed in their last long interview—that the present condition of her nieces and nephews was due to her lifelong neglect of them. What help did she think she could give them now? And—this last was the most persistent question of all—why had Naomi fainted to-night? Emphatically he told himself she was not the fainting type.

He straightened irritably. A modest rap at the door was followed by the head of his man Stevens, who humbly projected it around the door-jamb.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said hurriedly, "but might I have a word with you?"

Long followed him into the hall and closed the door.

This was the second interruption of the evening, but probably they'd all shake down into a fairly normal life after a few days more. In the meantime his expression conveyed to Stevens a sense of the value of time.

"Sorry to interrupt," the man said in a different tone, "but something has just happened that I think you ought to know about."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Mrs. Price has left."

"Left? What do you mean?"

"She left six or seven minutes ago. I think she's gone for the night."

"What nonsense is this?" Long spoke sternly, glancing at his watch. "It's not quite eleven. She may have gone to post a letter in the box at the gates."

"No, sir. That is, I'm sure she didn't. She took a small suitcase and got into a taxicab out on the highway and offered the driver double fare to hurry." As the listener took this in silence, Stevens went on: "It was only by chance I saw her, slipping down the stairs with a suitcase in her hand. She knew the family was playing cards and billiards, and I guess she thought the coast was clear. She had the air of wanting it to be."

"You're taking too much for granted," Long said coldly. "We're not prisoners here."

"I know that. But the house is locked at twelve, and it certainly doesn't look as if Mrs. Price intends to be back by that time."

"Just the same, she may be."

Stevens played his trump card.

"I doubt it," he said respectfully but firmly. "I left the house after her and followed her through the grounds, keeping back of the shrubbery till she got out on the road. Then I saw her pick up the cab. I heard the address she gave the driver. It was the Wellington Arms, in Waterford."

Long nodded. "That's her apartment-house—the one she left, to-day, to come here. Her lease hasn't expired, so she still has the use of her apartment till it's sublet. She may have gone back to get something."

"Yes, sir, she may." Stevens's tone was doubtful. "Just the same, she's left herself mighty little leeway to be back by twelve."

"Get out my roadster," Long decided. "Have it outside the gates, not at the door—understand?"

"Yes, sir." Stevens hurried away and Long opened the billiard-room door and spoke to the players.

"I'll leave you youngsters now," he told them. "Thanks for some pleasant games; and good night."

He closed the door without waiting for their expressions of regret and hastened out of the house, taking his coat and hat from the hall rack and putting them on as he went. There was a delay of five minutes before his car appeared. When it came he asked another question:

"You said Mrs. Price seemed anxious to slip away without being seen. What made you think that?"

"She seemed very nervous; quite upset."

Long entered the roadster and grasped the wheel. It was now eleven. He ought to be able to reach the Wellington Arms in twenty-five minutes. That, he reflected, would allow him ten minutes there and twenty-five more for the return before midnight. He made good time. It was exactly twenty-five minutes past eleven when he entered the dim vestibule of the big building and approached the clerk at the night desk.

"Mrs. Price has just returned, hasn't she?" he suggested.

"Yes, sir, a few minutes ago."

"Has she gone up to her apartment?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get her on the telephone, please. You needn't say there's a caller. I'll speak to her as soon as the connection is made."

A moment later he put through his message:

"Mrs. Price? This is Nicholas Long. I've followed you here. Of course I've got to see you, at once. May I come up?"

There was a long silence. Then Mrs. Price spoke in a voice almost unrecognizable:

"Why . . . yes, Mr. Long . . . of course . . . if you think it's necessary."

Long replaced the instrument on its hook.

"Mrs. Price expects to be here a day or two, I take it," he said casually. But the clerk had begun to think he had spoken too hastily in the initial conversation with this urbane stranger.

"She didn't say anything about her plans," he remotely informed the visitor.

Long hurried to the elevator, left it at the third floor, and, following the directions of the night elevator operator, tapped lightly at the door of Suite 38. Mrs. Price opened it and faced him in a speechless anger she seemed vainly trying to control. She made no move to let him in, but he took permission for granted and passed her, going through the dim vestibule into her sitting-room.

"You'll forgive my zeal," he said cheerfully, ignoring her manner, "but I was afraid you had forgotten that absurd Cinderella rule of ours and wouldn't get back in time, so I took the liberty of following you. I have my roadster, and I can get you home with a few minutes' leeway if you're ready to start at once. Are you ill?" he added quickly. Through an open door at the other end of the room he had seen another figure, a tall woman in a nurse's uniform. Miss Webb? He was sure it was not she. Yet was it?

Mrs. Price gave him an odd, measuring glance and her face quivered convulsively. When she finally spoke it was in a rough, unnatural voice.

"No, I'm not sick," she said. She added with an effort: "It's kind of you to come for me. I hated to come alone, but I didn't want to disturb any of the children and I simply *had* to have something I'd forgotten. Give me two minutes and I'll throw it into my case and be with you."

She disappeared into an inner room as she spoke,

remembering to take with her the case she had dropped in a corner. She was wearing no hat or coat, but she might have thrown those things off for the momentary relief of their disuse. Certainly she would have cast aside her heavy fur coat, for the dimly lighted sitting-room was overheated. Long stood at the window with his back to the room and frowned out into the darkness. Three things were clear to him: she was clever, she was furious, and she was afraid. He wondered what she was afraid of. She was gone so long that the delay put him on the edge of his nerves. Then she hurried back into the room still carrying the suitcase, which he hastened to take from her.

"I suppose it was silly of me to start so late," she fluttered, and he was aware of a surprising change in her voice and manner. She was calm again. She had forgiven him and the eight cylinders of her social charm were working, though not so smoothly as usual. "But I was sure I could just make it, even if I was cutting it rather fine," she added as they hastened to the elevator; "and I really had to have the thing I forgot. It was my thermolite that I bake my bad knee with every night. My comfort the next day depends on it. It was so important that I put it all by itself on the window-seat in my bedroom here. Then, because it was away from the other things, it was overlooked. That's the way we women do, you know. Of course you're too systematic to have anything like that happen to you—"

"I'm too systematic to let Stevens have it happen."

Long spoke rather absently. He was wondering who that nurse was. "How about your friend in there?" he casually added. He must know whether or not that was Miss Webb. "Is she coming back with us?"

It was clear that Mrs. Price was startled by the question. She hesitated, then spoke too volubly.

"No, she's going to stay in my apartment for some time. In fact, there's a chance that I'll sublet it to her, so she's trying it out. But of course I had to see her for a moment before I came away. That's what delayed me." She seemed to have forgotten the excuse about the knee, but now she remembered it. "She was going to give me a treatment," she added sedately. "She's clever about that sort of thing, and awfully kind."

The hearer wished Mrs. Price wouldn't embroider her story so much. He had almost believed she might be telling the truth, till that last touch about the treatment. He carried the little case down to the hall and surrendered it to the clerk, who took it out to the waiting roadster. The clerk was a young man of more discretion than he had revealed in their opening encounter. He expressed no surprise at the departure of the lady, nor did he drop any remark that had to do with her arrival.

They reached Miss Chandler's house with two minutes to spare, and Long felt as he bade Mrs. Price good night at the foot of the staircase that he was ready to call it a day. She had been very silent on the way back, but unresentful. Before going upstairs

he went to the dining-room, where in the sideboard he kept a bottle of his favorite whisky. As he took out the bottle he suspected that young Dixon had visited it before him, and he remembered that hereafter he must not leave temptation in the boy's way. Not that it would make much difference. Dixon undoubtedly had a supply in his own room.

The electric lights in the dining-room had been turned out and he did not take the trouble to turn them on again. There was sufficient illumination for his purpose, from the last slowly burning log in the fireplace. He poured out a small drink, filled the glass with soda, and dropped in a lump of ice from a bowl Johnson or perhaps young George had thoughtfully left on the sideboard. Then he sank into a chair before what remained of the fire and meditatively sipped his whisky while he reviewed the events of the evening.

But it was Naomi he thought of and not Mrs. Price. It was natural enough that every one should be on the edge of his or her nerves. The week had been a strenuous one for the family. That in itself might explain Naomi's faint in Miss Chandler's room. Just the same, if he had been asked for an opinion before she went in, he'd have bet his hat that she'd go through whatever was before her, without turning a hair. He must again talk the matter over with Miss Webb and try to convince his efficient aide that a common showing of hands was advisable. With each of them working independently, as they were obviously doing,

they might easily ball things up. But he wouldn't show his hand until she did. . . .

He heard Johnson lock the big front door and then move along the hall, presumably turning out the lights. The butler passed the open door of the dim dining-room, went on to the rear hall, and apparently descended the back stairs to the servants' quarters, for the sound of his footsteps ceased.

Long finished his modest drink, rose and stretched wearily. Then he set down the glass and left the dining-room. But his feet stopped on the hall side of the threshold. He swiftly closed the door behind him and stared into the darkness. Was some one else leaving the house?

The lights on the second floor were still burning and their reflection lent a dim glow to the lower hall. Through this he saw two figures, passionately interlocked, at the foot of the central staircase. The man's figure was George Dixon's. He could not be sure of the girl's till she spoke. Then her words were muffled, for her face was crushed against George's shoulder, her arms held him almost frantically, and she was sobbing. They were tragic sobs, strangled and desperate and interspersed with gulps like those of a frightened child. George seemed trying to calm her. She could have been heard by any one passing through the upper hall, but it was clear that she had lost all thought of others. The scene appeared to be the culmination of one in the living-room, where the two

must have remained behind the rest. But at last words came clearly to the unseen listener, words uttered in Naomi Sabin's voice.

"Oh, George!" she moaned, "how in God's name can we go through with it?"

George kissed the top of her black head.

"I don't know whether we can go through with it or not," he muttered, "but one thing's sure. We mustn't let that precious pair of spies know that we're on to what they're looking for!"

CHAPTER VI

THE HOUSEWARMING

NICHOLAS LONG had slept badly. That made him as nearly irritable at breakfast as he ever permitted himself to be. But the meal and the atmosphere of the room soothed him. A brilliant sun brought out the high lights on cut glass, old brass, and silver. The young folks around him seemed in better spirits. Even Naomi Sabin was smiling her sophisticated little smile at something Henry was saying to her. She did not look at George during the meal, Long observed. He remembered now that she rarely looked at George and almost never spoke to him. It was hard to believe that last night he had seen that passionate embrace, had heard that desperate outburst. . . .

The breakfast was perfect. Miss Webb, in her immaculate uniform, was an almost radiant figure at the table. She seemed in some way to belong to the glory of the morning. Mrs. Price alone was missing. One of her daughters remarked casually that Mother usually breakfasted in her room.

Long drove to his Waterford office feeling uplifted. His content lasted throughout the day and even remained undimmed when Catherine Price, meeting him in the hall when he got home in the late afternoon,

casually mentioned that "The Troubadour" was coming to dinner.

"That young ass Bryce?" Long said with strong distaste. "I've heard of him, but I've never heard anything I liked. I rather hoped he had been swept out by the cleaners when you left your apartment at the Wellington Arms."

"He must have clung to a rug and escaped," Catherine suggested. "Anyway, here he was, when we unpacked the things we brought with us. His being here won't mean any extra expense—or mighty little, for he doesn't eat much—so Lil thought you wouldn't mind having him at the table. But you're making a noise like a heavy father just now, aren't you?"

She had been standing on a lower step of the broad central staircase, facing Long, who was just about to ascend it. Now she perched herself on one of the newel-posts and revealed a desire for conversation. Long smiled down into the pretty, hard little face. Catherine's color scheme this season was based on the shade known as tangerine. She had treated her lips, cheek-bones and nicotine-stained finger-tips with it, and had even touched up the lobes of her ears. Under the smooth close-fitting cap of her shingled blond hair her sophisticated gray-blue eyes looked at him with an odd speculation in their glance. He met the look with interest. He was due to learn something about modern youth from this exotic bunch he was with.

"Is it true that you plucked Mother as a brand

from the burning last night?" Catherine abruptly asked.

"You'll have to be less cryptic with me. I'm only a simple lawyer." He decided to switch her back to the main subject: "Is your sister really interested in the youth who is dining with us to-night?"

"The Troubadour?"

"I mean young Bryce, if that's really his name."

"You don't like him, do you?"

"Frankly, he strikes me as a combination of leech and windbag. I can't quite see how a nice girl can stand having him around."

"Lil isn't a nice girl," said Lil's sister, simply. "She's about the limit herself, you know. And of course Dick's an awfully dim bulb in some ways. But he has his points, and we're all used to having him under our feet. One kicks a footstool out of one's way, and there's Dick. I suppose," she added, giving her mind to the problem, "one of the reasons he's around so much is that he hasn't any home, himself, except an attic somewhere."

"Does he work?"

"Of course he doesn't. How could he work and be tagging after Lil sixteen hours a day?"

"How does he live?"

"I've wondered about that, myself, sometimes. We usually feed him, but I don't know who dresses him. You can ask him all these things if you're really interested. He loves to talk about himself." Catherine

was thoughtfully regarding the buckles on her satin slippers.

"I may if I happen to think of it. By the way, who's going to make the upstairs pilgrimage to-night?"

"I am. I settled it with Miss Webb this afternoon."

"Are you apt to be nervous in the darkness?"

"Not unless the darkness embraces me, as they say it does, sometimes." But despite her flippancy Catherine showed that she did not care to pursue this topic. "You haven't answered my question yet," she hastily reminded him. "How did you persuade Mother to come back last night?"

"She didn't need any persuasion," Long said with dignity. "She had merely gone back to the city to get something she'd forgotten."

Catherine nodded.

"I suppose that would do as well as any other stall she could give you," she conceded. Then, as her companion's expression changed, she jumped down from the newel-post and gave him a nod of farewell.

He lingered. "What did you mean by that?"

"I may tell you soon. I know I'll have to, though I almost never tell the story of our lives to any one. But not yet. At present you're dismissed. . . . You'll lose some of your charming manners in this stage setting, Uncle Nicholas," she called after him as he went on upstairs. "I actually begin to think you're losing them already," she added. "Stop at George's room on your way to dinner. He's mixing some cocktails, and he's invited us all to a housewarming."

"Thanks." Long threw back the word without turning, and went on to his room, looking thoughtful. Just what did the child mean by that remark about her mother? The prospective housewarming also annoyed him. The meaning of that was clear enough. It was a gesture of defiance of "that precious pair of spies" and of the whole situation. But when he had dressed and was ready for dinner he hesitated only an instant at George's door before tapping and going in. He was given an exuberant greeting, in the midst of which George demanded and collected a dollar from Lily. Lily, it appeared, had made a bet that "Uncle Nicholas" would not grace the function.

The big room with its open fire and its two windows overlooking the rear garden had been made into a really charming sitting-room, with easy-chairs, smoking-tables, reading-lamps, heavy-silk curtains and a broad cushioned davenport adding to its effect of luxurious comfort. George explained this as he pocketed his dollar.

"Welcome to our citadel," he said. "Henry and I decided to put both our beds into one room and make this our common sitting-room. That is, I decided it and Henry gave in after I'd got him down on the floor and bounced on his stomach a while. It's a grand idea. Henry can put me into my crib when I come home drunk, and the rest of the time I can give him lessons in the social graces. He's a trifle heavy at present. I need hardly introduce you to this happy band," he added with an expansive wave of the cock-

tail shaker he had been manipulating. "Heave Ethel out of that chair and be comfy."

Long took in the circle as he repressed Ethel's tentative move and sat down on a cushioned window-seat. They were all there except Miss Webb—Mrs. Price and her daughters, Henry, Ethel, Naomi, and a large, fair young man with a round face, yellow hair rather like the down on a newly hatched chicken, and very round light-blue eyes, set in the unwinking stare of an interested infant, who now, with amazing lightness of movement, skipped across the room to shake hands. Long gave Dick Bryce four limp fingers and turned from him to take in the details of the party.

Every one was formally dressed for dinner, and even Mrs. Price, who held a half-emptied cocktail glass in her hand, was again flushed and animated. He suspected that there had been a round or two of drinks before his arrival. The Price girls and Ethel Dixon were holding out their glasses to be refilled. Mrs. Price also permitted George to "cool" her cocktail by a fresh libation from the shaker.

"You've almost let the poor little thing get a temperature," he reproached her. Long observed that Naomi and young Bryce had not touched their glasses, and now Bryce explained the phenomenon.

"I never need cocktails when I'm with Lily," he sentimentally sighed. "She always goes to my head!"

It was one of the remarks that made Long want to kick him.

George Dixon, care-free and buoyant, was plainly

enjoying his combined rôle of host and bartender. He had put on a white-linen coat and was expertly mixing more drinks at a well-equipped and beautiful old Sheraton sideboard in the corner. A dozen different bottles stood impressively before him, and the variety of liqueurs and syrups he poured into his decoctions made Long raise his eyebrows. The cocktail shaker held two quarts.

There was a piano in the room, and Dick Bryce, whose parlor tricks included the constant display of a genuine musical gift, now drifted toward it and softly began to play the leading airs from a current musical comedy. Nobody listened. Occasionally he sang, in a high, sweet tenor voice. He played facing away from the piano, his round blue eyes on Lily, making it plain that he was playing and singing only to her; that, notwithstanding the noisome presence of others, he considered her alone with him in the universe.

"Come over here and sit beside me and look into my eyes and forget these sodden beasts around you," he urged Lily, who was still revealing a vague consciousness of the presence of others; and Lily came, carrying her latest cocktail in an unsteady hand. George Dixon suddenly set down the shaker and struck an attitude depicting remorse.

"Gee whiz, Henry!" he cried. "We forgot to invite Miss Webb to our housewarming!"

Henry Hutchins rose at once, with a shocked expression. "Of course I thought you had; I'll go down and get her now."

"No, I'll go. Our new life together must be founded on sincerity, Henry, so I don't mind saying that when it comes to the lighter touches in lying I can lay you out cold. You'd let Miss Webb think we forgot her. I'll convince her that she's kept us all waiting half an hour."

He raced out of the room as he spoke and they heard him descending the staircase two steps at a time. Within five minutes he was back with the latest arrival.

"Some hosts might think it was embarrassing to have to pursue a guest to her private lair and drag her to a party by physical force," he complacently observed as he ushered her in, "but Henry and I are not sensitive. Miss Webb, I've got two kinds of cocktails here. Which will you have? Or will you have them both?"

"Neither, thanks," she softened the rejection with a brilliant smile and crossed the room to speak to Catherine. Long watched her, interested in her quick change from the rôle of trained nurse to that of woman of the world. She was wearing the second of her new gowns, and there was no trace of professional manner about her. She seemed wholly at ease in this new setting, and her smile was as sophisticated as Naomi's. The gown she had worn last night had been green. To-night's was a silvery affair and very becoming. A little later he was surprisingly annoyed to find that Henry Hutchins had established her on one of the window-seats and was playing the rôle of attentive host. Long studied his fellow-revelers and discovered

something. The malignant glance Mrs. Price had given Miss Webb last night had meant definite enmity. Her sole acknowledgment of the nurse's entrance had been a curt nod, and her manner now was in sharp contrast to the offhand cordiality of the others.

The dinner-gong sent up a second mellow summons. No one had heeded its first notes, but now Miss Webb rose at once.

"I happen to know that the dinner is too good to be kept waiting," she said after a word of appreciation to her hosts; and George, tucking her hand under his arm, impressively led her down to the dining-room.

As the others trooped after them Long, glancing back from his place near the head of the procession, reflected that it ought to be rather jolly for an old bachelor to have so much youth around him. He was amused by his own shuttlecock attitude. Even the Troubadour seemed almost unobjectionable now, though he had a firm arm around Lily's waist and was explaining in his high drawling voice that her little feet were far too tender to descend the steps without its aid. At the bend of the staircase the pair stopped short and exchanged a long kiss.

"Lily!" Mrs. Price said patiently.

Ethel Dixon, finding her path blocked by the absorbed couple, promptly swung herself astride of the mahogany stair rail and slid the rest of the journey, incidentally revealing the fact that her entire wardrobe for the evening consisted of her gown, her slippers, a pair of long silk stockings and what is optimistically

described by haberdashers as "step-ins." George Dixon and Catherine Price followed her example with open enthusiasm. Naomi and Henry unobservantly walked around the "necking party," as George described it, and continued their progress downstairs. At their leisure Lily and Bryce also slid down the stair rail, but when they reached the lower hall the Troubadour took occasion to rebuke Ethel severely.

"Old stuff," he told her. "Why didn't you walk downstairs on your hands?" And Ethel was so eager to oblige then and there that Long had to take her arm and urge her toward the dining-room.

There, one of the sudden changes of mood one could never foresee struck Miss Chandler's nieces and nephews. In turn and with entire deference they bowed to the empty chair of their hostess as they passed it. Long saw that the Troubadour had set the example, and, tight-lipped, the lawyer stood waiting for a look or action he could resent. There was none. The little courtesy seemed as natural and instinctive as if Catherine Chandler sat there in person, and Long could almost see the slow inclination of the haughty white head with which she would have acknowledged it. Moreover, it established a precedent. The courtesy was never again omitted, and thereafter Mrs. Price, Miss Webb and Long took part in it.

The dinner itself was actually gay, and there was no longer in the lawyer's mind a doubt that youth had its place and its charm. The increasing badinage in which the youngsters engaged was amusing and

harmless, and Dick Bryce was too much absorbed in his dinner to indulge in his usual outspoken love-making. Despite Catherine's testimony, he revealed a good appetite and Long inferred that it was several days since he had dined well. The young man revived, however, during the dessert and showed a sudden desire to climb Miss Webb's family tree.

"Do you come from the Bradford Webb branch?" he wanted to know.

"There are some Bradford Webbs in the family," Miss Webb admitted without enthusiasm.

"Then you must be the Hope Webb that went to school in Paris with my sister Maud," Bryce persisted.

George Dixon's sudden exclamation checked Miss Webb's reply.

"Great Scott, Dick! I didn't suppose you had anything as respectable as a sister in your life," he commented.

"Naturally I couldn't have her meet the likes of you," Bryce retorted with some spirit. "She married in France and she's living there, with the ocean safely between you."

George remarked rather absently that of course a girl who was Dick's sister would have to do something like that about it, and the topic apparently lost its interest for all but three persons at the table. Long was impressed. So, obviously, was Mrs. Price. He caught her quick, sharp look at the nurse—a look that conveyed her intense dislike. It disturbed him. He could imagine no cause for such an emotion, and cer-

tainly there was every reason why the two women should get on amicably; or, if they couldn't, why they should not at least simulate a cordiality they did not feel.

But neither made the pretense. Mrs. Price frankly ignored the nurse, and the latter accepted the attitude with a quiet dignity tinged with watchfulness. She was evidently conscious of every word and action of the older woman, and Long suspected that Mrs. Price knew this, too. A little later he was sure she did. He also observed that George's sudden glance at Naomi was not returned. Naomi was listening to Henry—she must be well up in first editions by now, the lawyer grimly reflected—and she appeared not to have heard the interchange between Bryce and the nurse.

After dinner the young folks danced in the billiard room, to the music of a phonograph George borrowed from the servants' quarters. With the rugs pushed into a corner the big room, with its polished floor, was an excellent setting for an impromptu dance, though the dance itself, in Long's opinion, was in the worst possible taste. The mistress of the house had been in her grave less than ten days, and already the present extemporized affair had some of the earmarks of a small orgy.

The dances, for instance—the Charleston and the Black Bottom and an exaggerated five-step, to mention only three of them. Even Naomi and Henry Hutchins were dancing the Black Bottom—surely the most uncouth and suggestive dance ever indulged in by sup-

posedly decent young creatures. Early in the action George had sprinted upstairs, returning a few moments later with a tray holding glasses and his refilled cocktail shaker. . . . George and his sister and Lily Price were the only guests who drank, but they drank often. . . .

Long watched them for a little while and then went off to the living-room. Miss Webb, he observed, had seated herself in a corner of the billiard room, under a wall light, and was again working on the handkerchief that threatened to be a permanent institution. He admired her courage. Of course the young things didn't want her there, but there she was, for reasons which doubtless seemed good to her. Her manner held no disapproval, but within half an hour of Long's departure she proved that she was not lost to the duties of her position.

"We mustn't forget the little visit to Aunt C. C.," Henry casually observed during one of the intermissions for refreshments, and while Catherine was out of the room for a moment. "Which of us is going to-night?"

The dancers looked at one another, and the Troubadour followed their exchange of glances with a slight additional rounding of his blue eyes. He had not heard of this feature of the new program.

"I'll go," George volunteered. "It'll be a jolly experience compared with the last visit I made Auntie. Whew! What the devil made me think of that now?" He shrugged as if to cast off a physical weight, and

eagerly finished the cocktail in his glass. "Nothing to prevent me from taking this along, I suppose," he asked Miss Webb as he refilled the glass.

"I wouldn't if I were you," the nurse said quietly. "I wouldn't go to-night—if I were you!"

"I'll go," Ethel said quickly, springing as usual to the aid of her beloved twin. She started unsteadily toward Miss Webb, and the nurse shook her head.

"I wouldn't go either, if I were you," she unsmilingly told Ethel.

"Then I'll go and call on dear Auntie, myself," Lily Price sullenly announced.

"You won't do anything of the kind!" Catherine, who had opened the door unheard and was standing on the threshold, spoke so sharply that Lily flushed. "I'm going. It's all arranged. Why didn't you tell them that, Miss Webb?" As the nurse did not seem to hear the question, Catherine went on in a different tone: "I'm older. Besides, I'm Aunt C. C.'s namesake, so it's proper that I should make the next call."

"But what's it all about?" the Troubadour insisted on knowing. When he was told, he glanced at Catherine and spoke with sudden seriousness.

"You're it," he said.

"Don't I know it?"

"I like that! What business is it of yours, Dick Bryce?" Lily fiercely demanded.

"Anything that takes you from me even for half an hour is my business, Star of my life," Dick sighed, and lifted his voice in a love-song. Lifting his voice

in song, Long soon discovered, was the best thing young Bryce did. If there was a piano in the room with him, he played and sang. If there was not, he sang anyway. His singing and playing became a steady undercurrent of the new life they were all living together.

"And it's the only business he's got, so he has to work hard at it," George contributed. George's handsome face was flushed and his mouth sagged loosely, but otherwise he showed no effects of the steady drinking in which he was indulging. Every member of the group was smoking now and Henry Hutchins opened a window, absently letting the cold November wind blow over the nurse's bare shoulders. She rose.

"If you're going up," she said to Catherine, "why not go now?"

Catherine nodded, rather sulkily. She had no idea of being ordered around by Miss Webb. But she followed her out of the room, and the others resumed their dancing.

In the living-room Nicholas Long had drawn a big chair close to that of Mrs. Price. They sat side by side before the open fire, with a misleading effect of coziness and companionship, but the remarks they exchanged were desultory and absent-minded. His companion's brief animation had left her. She was jerkily nervous and cast frequent glances at the door. At last Long spoke in a tone of quiet determination.

"Mrs. Price," he said, "I'm going to ask your advice."

"Yes?" She showed no interest.

"Of course you know what it's about," he went on. "I don't want to seem a kill-joy or a grouch, but, frankly, I don't think this sort of thing is right."

"This sort of thing?" She looked at him as if wondering what he meant. He could have shaken the woman.

"Yes—this dancing and drinking. And the noise they're making out there is in atrocious taste."

"Oh, that!" she said, and he had an impression that she was relieved.

"I've no doubt the servants are talking their heads off about it this minute," he went on.

"But don't you think," she said vaguely, as if her mind were on something else, "that it's better for the children to be doing it here than in cabarets? We know what they're about and where they are."

She was not interested, but she was at least speaking as one human being to another, and he saw her point. He saw, too, that her attitude toward the present situation was wholly different from his own. She had the vast indifference of her type toward the opinions of servants. She knew there were no neighbors near enough to hear and be shocked by the jazz and the other noises. For the rest, he told himself, she was so used to what was going on, she was so saturated with its familiar atmosphere and so stifled by the restrictions of the "modern" parent, that it had no message for her. She had lost her sense of values. She sat before him, a weary, disillusioned woman, trying

to make the best of the stale adventure she called life. But she must still be a devoted mother and he thought he knew how to reach her.

"I'm not such an old foggy as to object to dancing," he said more lightly, "or even to a reasonable amount of drinking. But those youngsters are not doing a reasonable amount of it. George and Ethel and, if you'll forgive me for saying so, your two daughters, have all had much more than is good for them already. But I've just heard George slip upstairs again and I don't doubt he'll be back with another supply. Haven't you thought of the effects of this thing on the health and nerves of your girls?"

She nodded, then yawned widely. An expression of acute boredom settled over her face like a mask.

"What can I do?" she asked indifferently. "We're living in an age when the average mother in my set has no more authority over a child than a stranger has. Lookers-on are apt to forget that."

"Then don't be an average mother. And whether you have authority or not, you must certainly have influence."

But he spoke without hope. He realized now that she would do nothing.

"Not a particle," she said and yawned again. "The lightest word of any young friend of my girls has more weight with them than any arguments of mine."

She leaned forward abruptly and held out her hands to the fire—a trick of hers, he had already learned, when her nerves threatened to get the better of her.

It was a revealing trick, for the thin hands were shaking.

"You don't understand," she suddenly brought out. "I suppose nobody could understand the hell I've gone through for years—getting deeper into debt every season, hounded by creditors, worried to distraction by my children, and knowing all the time that my sister Catherine could have made life decent and . . . and . . ." she felt for the word and produced it with bitterness: "and *possible*, and could do it without turning a hair, and yet wouldn't do it. Toward the last I saw that she enjoyed watching my misery. It made me hate her, at times."

She broke off and crouched farther forward in her chair, still holding to the blaze those shaking hands. He looked at her with concern. It was clear enough that she was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Before he could speak she turned to him with another abrupt change of manner.

"How much longer have we got to endure that woman?" she imperiously asked.

"That woman . . . you mean Miss Webb?"

"Of course I mean Miss Webb. Whom else could I mean?" All her suavity, all her charm, were gone.

"You don't like her?" Long grasped at the possible chance to get at the bottom of the feeling between the women.

"Like her! I loathe her! Surely you see what she is! She's Catherine's hired spy. She's a cat at a mouse-hole, and we're the mice."

"I think you're letting your imagination run away with you," Long said gently. "I hope the children don't share this notion."

"It isn't imagination, and you know it. And the children do share it; at least Lily and Naomi do, for they've spoken to me about it. The rest will feel it soon enough, if they don't already."

Long frowned into the fire. He had thought Miss Webb rather tactless, to put it mildly, when she established herself in the billiard room with the young folks. He couldn't quite follow her object in doing that. But even as the thought came, the thing was explained. The door of the living-room flew open and Catherine put her shining boyish head around the side of it.

"I'm going upstairs to make my call on dear Auntie," she announced. "So you needn't have that duty on your mind to-night, Mater."

"I'll go. I had planned to go," Mrs. Price said quickly.

"No, it's all settled. There was a lively competition for the privilege, but I won out, and Miss Webb's here waiting to go up with me. See you later," and Catherine closed the door.

Mrs. Price moved her thin shoulders in a helpless gesture and settled back into her chair.

"You see: she moves us around like pawns."

"A minute ago we were mice," Long smiled.

"We're both, and we're everything else that's helpless. That woman's acting like a jailer and we're simply her prisoners."

"Oh, come now! Your nerves are getting the better of you. Miss Webb is simply trying to do her duty in a very difficult position. She's both the housekeeper and a member of the family, and we're almost strangers to her. She's in a tight place, and we mustn't make things any harder for her and for ourselves than they need to be. I've no doubt she's carrying out Miss Chandler's instructions to the best of her ability."

He decided, as he spoke, to mention to Miss Webb the need of a little more tact in her relations with the high-strung humans around her, and then remembered that it would not be easy to make the suggestion. Miss Webb had an air of seeing her way ahead and resolutely following it.

"She seems to be a woman of good family," he went on, under the effect of this reflection. "Did you notice what young Bryce said at the table, about her belonging to the Bradford Webbs? And being at school in Paris?"

"Yes. And she's supposed to have had most of her hospital training there, too, not to speak of a few other things she had. I happen to know some things about Miss Webb's life in Paris that would surprise you. Among others, I know that she goes in for drink and worse."

"Really?" Long spoke with constraint. He was intensely angry. His manner made her look at him. She laughed.

"You don't like to have the paragon criticized, do

you? But, after all, I suppose she isn't any worse than the rest of them. What are a few lovers more or less to the independent young woman of to-day?"

"I think you have been misinformed," Long said stiffly. He was amazed by his inner uprush of resentment.

"Oh, no. I've heard a lot about her from a nurse that worked with her in the Satterlee Hospital at Waterford. But we won't say anything more about it, since you have such faith in her."

"It's clear enough that your sister trusted her."

"What did Catherine know about her? I tried to warn her," she added, "but she wouldn't listen. Oh, well, let's drop the subject. You'll find her out soon enough."

She obviously dropped the subject, but he could not let it lie there.

"The Satterlee Hospital is one of the best in the State," he pointed out. "Any one connected with that—"

"She hasn't been connected with it for two years; and she left it under a cloud. I haven't been able to get to the bottom of the matter yet, but I'm going to."

He found no answer to that, and for a long time they sat in a silence that separated them like a wall. Shouts of laughter came from the billiard room, followed by crashes of glass and another shout. A few minutes later Naomi and Henry Hutchins entered the living-room.

"It's getting rather lively out there," Henry reproachfully mentioned to Long. The lawyer's lips set.

"Yes. We won't have any more such performances after to-night. We'll call this a housewarming," he grimly added, "and let it go at that."

Naomi had dropped into a chair on the other side of the fire, and he was conscious of the steady gaze of her vivid eyes.

"Why did you go in for this sort of thing, Naomi?" he asked quietly. "I shouldn't have thought it would appeal to you."

She raised her straight eyebrows.

"I'll try anything once," she indifferently admitted. "Besides, I've never seen the whole bunch in action before. I wanted to see what they'd do."

"And you were moved by the same high intellectual curiosity, Henry?"

"Yes, sir, I was."

"What was it like, toward the end?"

"They were knocking the old glass pendants off the chandeliers with billiard balls when we left," Henry reported.

"Good Heavens! I can't believe it!" But Long started to his feet.

"It was a contest in marksmanship," Naomi said. "It's over now, and most of the pendants are down and broken, and Miss Webb's there. So I think there won't be any more of it."

"You bet there won't," Henry said with deep faith

in Miss Webb. "She hasn't got that red hair for nothing. She was still laying them out when we came away."

Long sank back in his chair and spoke to the listening fire.

"I'd had a dim hope," he told it, "that we could live here together for six months like reasonable human beings, but I'm afraid I was too optimistic."

The door opened and Catherine entered. Her eyes took in the little group, but she did not speak. Instead, with a muttered word of apology or annoyance—it was impossible to be sure which—she passed in front of her mother and Long, dropped upon a floor cushion before the fire, and crouched there in silence. Her mother's question was an unexpected tribute to Long:

"Have you been gone a whole half-hour, dear?"

"Yes."

"How was the black cell?" Henry put in.

"Horrible!"

"Horrible!" Long and Henry echoed the word in unison. Mrs. Price and Naomi looked at the girl with sudden expressions of strained attention.

"What was horrible about it?" Long demanded.

Catherine's expression changed and she shrugged.

"Oh, the blackness, I suppose, and the atmosphere. It's rather like a vault in there, you know," she said, with an effort to speak casually. Then, glancing at the faces around her she went on in a lower tone: "But there was something else, too. Naomi—" her voice

sharpened—"you went there last night. Did you have a feeling that some one was in the room with you?"

Naomi nodded.

"I *knew* some one was in the room with me," she said quietly.

CHAPTER VII

A PAJAMA PARTY

“**N**ONSENSE!” Long spoke so sharply that they all started. “Naomi,” he said, “you’re disappointing me horribly. I thought you had some poise and judgment.”

“I hope I have, Uncle Nicholas.” Naomi spoke with an unusual flatness in the modulations of her voice. “I wouldn’t have confessed what I did if there had been any one else here,” she went on steadily. “But surely we five can talk freely,” she went on. “Every one seems to know that each of us is to get certain messages in Aunt C. C.’s room. I don’t see why we shouldn’t speak of the whole experience in this little group.”

Long nodded. The girl was right. So far as he knew, Naomi and Henry were the most dependable members of the family. Mrs. Price, while nerve-racked and a foolish mother, was at least a woman of the world; and he had seen signs in Catherine of an unexpected insight and intelligence. Moreover, he again recalled the little staircase episode of the night before. The lovely Miss Sabin might be trying to put something over on him.

“That’s so,” he agreed. “We may as well have this

out. Why don't you two girls tell us as much as you can? Then if there's any strain there shouldn't be, or anything of that sort—" he met Naomi's blue glance again and finished rather lamely—"we'll try to put a stop to it."

"There's no question of stopping it, I'm sure," Naomi said. And Catherine muttered, "So am I."

"Then what—"

"It's clear that everything has been very carefully thought out," Naomi went on. "Miss Webb knows just what she is to do, and she's as professional about it as she'd be in a sick-room. She locks us in—"

"She *what!*" Long incredulously intercepted. His eyes never left Naomi's face.

"Oh, didn't you know that? Yes, she locks us in; that is, she locked me in. And I suppose Catherine heard the key turn on the outside of the door to-night just as I heard it last night."

"I did," Catherine confirmed. She was still sitting on the floor cushion, with her back to the others and her eyes on the fire. Now she turned her head toward Naomi. "You talk first," she invited. "Afterward I'll fill in my part of it, if there's anything I got that you didn't."

"It won't sound much in the telling," Naomi began after a moment's thought. "And I'm farther away from it than Catherine is; it doesn't seem as . . . well, as spooky to-night as it did last night. I've spent most of the day trying to explain it to myself in different ways. On the face of it there's only the experience

of being locked into a black room for half an hour and hearing Aunt Catherine's voice on a phonograph record. She evidently prepared a long talk for each of us and had the records made in the last three months of her life. It must have cost her a small fortune. Her voice is strong and clear and absolutely unmistakable. It's exactly as if she were in the room." The speaker turned to Catherine. "You felt that, didn't you?"

"Absolutely."

"She didn't begin right away," Naomi went on. "I suppose I waited a minute or so, long enough to let the darkness register, before I heard her voice. It gave me an awful jolt at first, there in the blackness, hearing Aunt Catherine speak and knowing she was in her grave," Naomi went on steadily. "But I heard the needle scrape, and of course when I figured it out and knew just what it was and how it was done, that panic passed."

"It might frighten some people very much," Long said uneasily, wondering how he himself would feel if he were sitting in darkness and Catherine Chandler's voice suddenly filled his ears. But Naomi shook her head.

"It was too characteristic to be really alarming," she said. "She began with her pet remark, which we all remember, that she could never get a word into the conversation when any one of us was around. At least, that was the gist of her first sentences, and her voice sounded as if she enjoyed getting back at us this way."

"I'll bet she did, too," Catherine interrupted. "I'll bet she grinned like a Cheshire cat all the time she was making those records."

"Just the same, that sort of thing might play the mischief with sensitive nerves," Long muttered. "But go on."

"I suppose I'd better go back to the beginning," Naomi reflected aloud, and followed her own suggestion: "At first I had the little jolts of getting into the chaise longue—it seems we have to sit in that—and then of hearing the key turn. I hadn't expected to be locked in and I was glad the chair was just opposite the door. I thought I could open it and slip out of the room if I got nervous. I don't like pitch-blackness."

"I don't mind it at all," Catherine said, "and I didn't really mind hearing the key turn. I simply thought it was silly to lock me in. Perhaps it was the cocktails that made me so comfy. Anyway, I was actually feeling dozy when the talking began. That woke me up, all right. I got the jolt, and it was a big one, for a minute. Go on, Naomi."

"As I've said, Aunt C. C.'s voice didn't frighten me after the first minute or two," Naomi continued. "I understood just how that was coming and it was awfully interesting. Aunt C. C. talked exactly as she always had, in that biting, sardonic fashion of hers. She said she was doing this because she couldn't get in a word to us when she was alive. But I hated the darkness more and more. I thought of the dark cells in prisons, the ones we've heard about, where the most

hardened criminals weaken after they've been in them a little while. I understood why they do. One begins to fancy things in the dark."

"I didn't mind the dark," Catherine repeated. "I lay back in the chair and got ready to listen comfortably. I was awfully interested, too. I thought it was mighty clever of the old girl to think of this way of getting back at us. And it was easier to listen to her than to sit still and think about our debts."

"Perhaps I imagined too much," Naomi said thoughtfully. "I'm beginning to think I did."

"What did you imagine?"

"I began to hear sounds."

"Yes. Little, queer rustlings," Catherine underlined. "The kind clothes make if one brushes against them. Or the kind a mouse might make among soft papers. At first I thought it *was* a mouse, in a closet, perhaps. The sounds didn't last long."

"No," Naomi confirmed. "Then, all of a sudden, I was perfectly sure some one was in the room. I hadn't been frightened by the rustling, or perhaps I had. Anyway, I told myself it was a mouse, and mice don't worry me. Or it might have been the rustle of a stiff curtain. I had a feeling that there was something large and . . . and . . ."

"Breathing," Catherine helped out. "Yes. I hated that breathing. It was queer . . . a little choked . . ."

"Yes. It went on for quite a while, and the more it went on the more I hated it."

"I tried to think it was air stirring somewhere.

Coming down the chimney, perhaps. There's a big fireplace in the room," and Catherine laughed rather shakily.

"All the time Aunt C. C.'s voice was going on, and I didn't miss a word she said. But I began to be perfectly sure some one was in the room."

"I decided some one was putting something over on me," Catherine broke in. "It came to me that it might be one of the bunch playing a joke, so I got up and moved around the room with my hands out in front of me—"

"I'd never have dared to do that," Naomi shuddered.

"What else did you think happened?" Long asked the question in a tone that made both girls look at him curiously.

"Nothing; or if it did I didn't know it," Naomi confessed. "The noises only came at intervals, just at first, and they stopped as suddenly as they began. Aunt C. C. was still talking, and all I could think of was what she was saying. She was getting terribly serious. I . . . I can't speak of that. But the next thing I knew the door was open and the light was shining in from the hall, and Miss Webb was pressing my head down to my knees. She said I had fainted. I don't know why I did that. I told her some one had been in the room and she laughed and gave me her word that no one had been. That settled it, for I'm sure she wouldn't lie about it."

"I'm not so sure of that," Mrs. Price said remotely.

"I am absolutely sure she would not," Long said.

"I didn't faint," Catherine broke out incisively. "I moved around. I wanted to get on the sides of the room where the windows were, and pull curtains apart to see what else was in there. Miss Webb was annoyed when I told her that. She said the order was to sit still, and that she'd make it clear to the rest. She said I had imagined the noises, and she gave me her word, too, that no one else had been there. But I hadn't imagined them.

"I didn't accomplish anything, though, by moving around. I got to the other side of the room and felt a door. I think it was the one leading into the bathroom, but it didn't help me, for it was locked and there was no key on my side. Then I struck another door. That must have been the closet door, but it was locked, too. That gave me my direction, though, and I started over toward the place where the windows ought to be. But there was a lot of furniture in the way. I looked afterward, when the light came on, and the big chairs and sofas were all in front of the windows like a kind of barricade. I had kept bumping my knees and ankles against them in the dark."

She stopped, but no one spoke and she went on again:

"When I got to the fireplace I was glad, for then I knew exactly where I was. The change of the furniture had confused me awfully. But every time I moved away from that door I always ran up against some

big chair or divan, so I stood for a long time with my elbow on the mantel, listening to Aunt C. C. . . . and to other things. . . .”

“Listening to what other things, dear?” Mrs. Price spoke in a low voice. “All this is rather hard to follow, you know.”

“You bet I know it,” her daughter admitted. “I was listening to the breathing and the faint stirring. Then I moved again and fell over Aunt C. C.’s chaise longue, and I got back into it and stayed there. The breathing seemed louder then, but of course that was my imagination. . . . Miss Webb must have heard me stumbling around, for she unlocked the hall door and came in a few minutes ahead of time and gave me ballyhoo for not sitting still.”

“That woman—” Mrs. Price began hotly and then stopped, plainly struggling for self-control. “You see Mr. Long, how much she takes upon herself. What can it matter to her whether we sit or walk during those idiotic visits? It’s enough that we’re there, isn’t it? That was all Catherine required.”

“Of course we can’t be sure that it was,” Catherine said soberly. “I’m not doing very clear thinking tonight, but it came to me very strongly that Aunt Catherine wouldn’t have wanted our attention distracted from what she was saying. She must have given a lot of thought to those records, and spent a lot of money for them, as Naomi says. She’d want us to listen and get what she was saying. That’s what Miss

Webb thought, too. All that interested her was whether we got the message."

"I didn't get quite all mine," Naomi admitted. "I must have fainted toward the end of it."

"I got all mine," Catherine said, and she added, "I think I'd rather have fainted."

Naomi rose quickly.

"Don't talk about the messages, Catherine. Let's have a game of billiards," she suggested. "You and I."

She hurried toward the door as she spoke, giving them no time to refuse, and Catherine and Henry followed her eagerly. All three, indeed, seemed in some fear of being stopped by their elders. But Long and Mrs. Price let them go without comment. Then Long spoke, his eyes on the fire.

"This is a queer mess," he said.

"And in some way that woman's back of it," Mrs. Price muttered.

"What woman?"

"You know whom I mean. The Webb person, of course. I think she planted the whole scheme in Catherine's mind, for some purpose of her own."

"My dear Mrs. Price!" At that trumpet-call to action Long became his suave professional self. "Don't you realize you're starting our association here in the wrong spirit?" he went on kindly. "God alone knows exactly what Catherine Chandler's purpose was. But we've got to admit, from what we've seen going on

since dinner, that any one in her position might hesitate to leave a fortune to these young wastrels. I don't want to be uncharitable, but to-night they've shown us pretty plainly what they are. Evidently Miss Chandler knew a whole lot more about them than they thought she did. Some revelation, a rather overwhelming one, I'd say, must have come to her—suddenly, too—to make her take such radical and unexpected action."

"I think you're right about that," Mrs. Price unexpectedly admitted.

"You do? Have you any idea what it was?"

He spoke so eagerly that she turned toward him and their eyes met and held. Long felt his heart drop a beat. Those eyes held a look that frightened him. But Mrs. Price removed her glance and spoke in her usual tone, looking down at the ringed hands that now lay quietly folded in her lap.

"I have an idea," she said. "Perhaps it would be franker to say that I have a suspicion. I believe and I think I'll be able to prove that Miss Webb started all this by her slanders of us. But I can't talk it over with you yet. Later I shall want your judgment and help. But I must clear up certain things first."

Long nodded.

"To be frank with you," he said, "I think you're doing Miss Webb a great injustice. Won't you try to be more open-minded? She's merely carrying out Miss Chandler's instructions. She hasn't been altogether tactful about it and I shall caution her. But if you and she continue at swords' points it will be a bad

example for the young folks, and it will make things harder all around. Whatever your suspicions are, you ought to give her the benefit of the doubt till you've proved them to be well founded. You see that, don't you?"

"I see that she's a snake," Mrs. Price hissed, with a sudden lack of self-control that startled him. "The mere thought of six months in the same house with her drives me frantic."

It was an inopportune time for Hope Webb to enter the room, but she came as if the other's words had been an invocation. She walked in with her buoyant college-girl stride, the incongruous bit of linen again in her hands. At her appearance Mrs. Price rose as if a spring in her had been touched, and Long, rising also, saw the look that passed between the two women. Then Mrs. Price turned to him with a rigid smile.

"Good night," she said, and with no other acknowledgment of the presence of the nurse, she went toward the door. Long followed her, and held it open while she passed through. Then he returned purposefully to his chair and fixed keen eyes on the face of the nurse.

"Miss Webb," he began without preamble, "I'm going to be very frank with you, if you don't mind."

The last four words were so obviously an after-thought that the nurse smiled.

"I don't mind," she said.

The smile was disarming and the lawyer's tone softened a trifle, but his purpose remained unchanged.

"You are running the house beautifully," he said. "The meals couldn't be better, and the domestic machinery moves to perfection. All that's to the good, and it's also a great relief to my mind. It proves that you can get on well with servants—a quality not so common among trained nurses as it should be, I'm told—and that you can make us all physically comfortable. You seem to get on fairly well with the young people, too, though your manner is a little too observant to be tactful. But when it comes to your association with Mrs. Price, you're less successful. It's important that you should get on with her—"

"I don't quite see why it is," Miss Webb murmured.

"Then I'll tell you. We're here in a difficult position, at the best. Great tact and adaptability are required in our association with every member of the family. Now that Miss Chandler is gone, Mrs. Price is the head of that family. She is accustomed to deference, she deserves it, and she should receive it from all of us."

"I admit that she may be accustomed to it," Miss Webb said quietly, her eyes on her work, her needle slipping in and out of the delicate fabric in her hands. She added deliberately, "I can't admit that she deserves it."

Long's face flushed with anger.

"Your personal opinion of Mrs. Price, and the matter of your liking or disliking her, are not important," he pointed out. "But I must insist that while

you are under the same roof with her you will treat her with the courtesy that is her due."

"There is no courtesy due Mrs. Price." Miss Webb spoke in a low tone and with an air of deep regret. Before he could speak she went on: "She has forfeited the right to courtesy. Besides, she wouldn't let me show it to her. She treats me with an abominable rudeness no one could be expected to ignore. You don't know much about Mrs. Price," she ended as he started to his feet.

For a moment he towered above her, staring into the brown eyes she raised to meet his. There was an odd look in those eyes. He had seen it once before. He did not understand it, but it made him pull himself together.

"Will you be good enough to explain what you mean?"

"No, I can't do that, yet." She spoke with intensified regret. "But you'll understand very soon—within a few weeks, I think, or perhaps even within a few days." She rose, folding up the absurd little handkerchief as she did so. "In the meantime, when you see her rude to me just remember that she knows that I know what she is."

Long stepped away from her so precipitately that his heel hit the brass fender behind him. "You don't mean—"

"I mean exactly what I say."

"You'll have to be more definite," he said between his teeth. He saw her stiffen.

"Pardon me, Mr. Long, but I shall not have to be anything of the kind. There is nothing in my instructions from Miss Chandler that requires me to tell you any more than I choose. And I have no idea of running to you every time I make a discovery. If we are to be of any use here, in a position which is even more difficult than you realize, we must work independently and with cool heads. It's for you to keep your eyes open and see what's before them."

Long's lips parted. Later, during a sleepless night, he wondered what he should have said, what he could have said. But, before he could speak, a sudden uproar came from the hall. The door was flung open and four Bacchanalian figures danced into the room to the accompaniment of the raucous music of the phonograph, whose strident tones reached them clearly from the billiard room.

Five minutes before, Long would have sternly checked that reeling procession, would have ordered its members to their rooms. Now, with the echo of the nurse's words still in the air, he merely retreated to the fire and with an elbow on the mantel stared silently at the invaders. He had finally grasped the primer lesson of his presence in that house. It was not for him to check, modify or command the actions of others there. It was merely for him to observe, and to learn what he could from that observation. He heard Hope Webb's voice in his ears.

"Don't mind them," she murmured. "They're

merely doing this to pretend they're not afraid. But they *are* afraid, horribly!"

The young things before him had obviously made up for their extemporaneous exhibition of a small pajama party in full action. Around their heads were wreaths of ivy, stripped, he learned the next morning, from the hanging brass pockets in the dining-room windows. Diagonally across their bare shoulders small fur rugs were pinned, retrieved from hall and bedroom floors. Their dancing legs and feet shone bare and white under turned-up pajama trousers which were the only garments they wore. To their mouths they held improvised paper pipes and covered combs, through which each blew, whistled or sang according to the individual fancy of the dancer.

The din they made was terrific. They danced twice around the big room, George Dixon and his sister hand in hand, taking the furniture as hurdles and going over it in flying leaps. Lily Price and the Troubadour proceeded more circumspectly. But as the four came down the long room on their second lap toward the two spectators, Lily Price was unexpectedly seized by the spirit of emulation. She rose in an effort to hurdle a low easy-chair, struck its back with her foot, and fell into it head first, dragging her companion with her.

For an instant she hung there, kicking helplessly, till the Troubadour sprang to his feet with his usual lightness and pulled her upright. She had hit her head

against a bit of carving on the chair and a small trickle of blood stained her temple close to the right eye. The Dixon twins, shocked into momentary silence by the sight of this blood, stood staring stupidly at the whimpering victim. Miss Webb, who had reached Lily's side almost as soon as the Troubadour, gave the little wound a brisk professional examination.

"No harm done," she said curtly. "It won't even leave a scar. But sit down here and I'll give it some antiseptic treatment."

She seated Lily by the fire as she spoke, wiped the blood from the girl's temple with the handkerchief she had been embroidering—Long was glad to see the thing put to some use at last—and left the room, obviously to get the remedies she thought necessary. Lily waited in the easy-chair, alternately sopping the injured temple and dully regarding the blood-stained handkerchief. The Dixons blinked at her uncertainly, clearly unable to understand just what had happened.

Long kept an unwinking gaze on the fire. He had made an instinctive movement to go to Lily's aid when she fell, and had checked it when Bryce and Miss Webb reached the girl. He realized that the room was still a merry-go-round to the Dixons, who had no clear idea where they were, and that Lily Price was rapidly sobering. His final discovery interested him more than the other two, and he continued to consider it while Miss Webb, returning after a surprisingly brief absence, sterilized and bound up Lily's injury.

Long's effort to help in that little matter of first aid was foiled by the Troubadour, who held basin, linen and adhesive plaster and expertly supplied each when it was required. His hand was steady, his round, staring blue eyes were as clear as a child's. He was wholly sober and had obviously been sober throughout the evening's orgy. Seeing the lawyer's eyes on him, he crossed to the mantel and smiled companionably.

"Awfully sorry we made such a row, sir," he cheerfully observed. "But the rest were determined to go out on the highway and take the first taxi to town. As it's after midnight, I thought it was better to let them come in here."

"So you're familiar with the new rules?" Long dryly observed.

"Yes, sir. They haven't talked of anything else all evening—while they were able to talk at all."

Long sent a straight look into the round blue eyes. In his rolled-up pajamas and absurd fur rugs the Troubadour looked like a freshly bathed baby.

"I infer that you yourself haven't been drinking."

The Troubadour made an airy gesture. "No, sir. I never drink."

"Then—" Long spoke with the first interest he had felt in the lad—"may I ask what attraction you find in this sort of thing? Is it just the fascination of seeing others make beasts of themselves?"

The Troubadour's round gaze grew rounder.

"Oh, no, it isn't that," he said deprecatingly.

"Then what is it?"

The Troubadour hesitated. "Can't we call it friendship? They're all my pals, you know."

Long forgot his newly formed resolution to be an observer only.

"It's a queer way for a sober man to show friendship," he sententiously remarked; "to encourage a misguided bunch of ne'er-do-wells to let themselves go."

A shadow crossed the Troubadour's clear eyes.

"Does it seem that way?" he asked depressedly. "It isn't, really. You see, Ethel and I are merely in this to look after Lily and George. You mightn't think so, but we can keep them from doing a whole lot of fool things if we're right in it all with them."

Long's mobile lips curved. He glanced at the twins, drooping side by side on the divan, and George met the look with a vague gesture.

"'S'n't time to go home," he genially hiccoughed.

"I can imagine that Ethel's restraint is particularly helpful to George," Long sardonically remarked.

The shadow over the Troubadour's blue eyes deepened.

"All this is something new with Ethel," he admitted. "She's never done it till this year. She's always gone along, just to apply the brakes as much as she dared. Lately something special has been worrying her, and she says as George is bound to go to the devil she'll go along with him. I can understand that," he added. "It's the way I feel about Lil. I thought perhaps I could pull her up, but I'm beginning to think

perhaps it can't be done. So all I can do is to stick 'round." He turned a long look on Lily, now obediently drinking aromatic spirits of ammonia at Miss Webb's order.

"She's all right now," he summed up, "so I suppose I'd better go."

"I think you had."

Long spoke almost kindly. He waited till the Troubadour had kissed Lily's eyes and ears and fresh bandage, and then accompanied the lad out into the hall and along it to the billiard room, where Bryce mentioned that he had left his clothes. Finally, after the youth's five-minute toilet, from which he emerged as fresh as if he were going to a ball, Long went with him to the big front door and shot back its massive bolt.

The Troubadour crossed the threshold and held out a steady young hand. "Good night, sir. Thank you."

"I suppose you can get a street car to the station." Long vaguely suggested as the boy was going down the steps.

"Not now. They stop running at midnight and it's after that. But the walk will do me good."

"Great Cæsar's Ghost! come back here! Of course you can't walk four miles to the station at this hour." Long spoke disgustedly but resignedly. He had remembered that Bryce's purse would not run to cab fares, even if a cab could be procured. Probably the lad hadn't a cent in his pockets. "Go on up to George's

sitting-room," he ended. "I suppose Henry will let you have the divan and a blanket."

He watched the Troubadour sprint up the stairs ahead of him, and he stopped at George's door long enough to repudiate with a vague hand-wave a second expression of the young man's gratitude for shelter. Then the lawyer went on to his own room with a grimace of self-distrust. He was not sure he was learning anything about his fellow-guests, but one thing seemed reasonably clear: he was getting some unexpected high lights on the character of Nicholas Long.

CHAPTER VIII

GEORGE MAKES A CONFESSION

BREAKFAST the following morning was the bleak function that might have been expected after the debauch of the preceding night. No one but Long, Miss Webb and the Troubadour had anything but coffee and orange juice. Mrs. Price, who unexpectedly appeared, absently pulled a roll to pieces and stared into vacancy, while George Dixon ostentatiously held his head in his hands during the greater part of the meal, uttering an occasional moan. Long suspected that Mrs. Price had suddenly remembered a rule concerning regular attendance at meals which Catherine Chandler had included in their schedule for the coming six months.

"If you feel like that, why the devil did you come downstairs?" Lily Price irritably asked George after the third moan.

"It's the triumph of hope over experience," George assured her, reviving slightly under this provocation. "I actually thought your society might divert my mind."

Lily retorted that in such cases there had to be something to divert, and Mrs. Price sighed, "Children!"

The Troubadour, who had come downstairs with his voice raised in song, was necessarily wearing his evening clothes. He looked as immaculate as he always did; but the sharp accent lent to the breakfast hour by this unseasonable attire added the final touch to Long's irritation.

"I should think you could have borrowed a smoking-jacket or a bath-robe or something from George or Henry," he observed, eying the young man with strong disfavor.

"So I could, sir, if the poor lads weren't so pindling," the Troubadour cheerfully assured him. "Neither of them has a garment that would go halfway around a really manly figure like mine. I hope it will be a lesson to them to exercise and develop their muscles. How about some golf this morning, darling?" he asked Lily. "I find there's a free course only two miles away and it isn't half bad. I'll go home and change and be back for you at eleven."

Lily and George groaned in unison.

"Don't you do it, Lil," George advised. "Stay quietly at home and I'll let you hold my head all morning."

Long felt that Lily would be ready at eleven. He had already observed that she usually followed young Bryce's suggestions.

George revived still further while he was finishing his second cup of black coffee.

"Let me say right now, to prevent any discussion later, that I'm nominated by acclamation to call on

Auntie to-night," he announced. "And I don't mind adding," he gloomily finished, "that if I'm still feeling the way I do now, it will take a hell of a message from her to keep me awake."

"I think you'll keep awake," Miss Webb predicted. She spoke pleasantly, but rather as if she were addressing a small boy. The Price girls exchanged glances and even the sweet-natured George showed a sudden flash of resentment.

"Now, just what do you mean by that?" he truculently demanded.

Miss Webb's eyebrows rose. "I think you'll be too much impressed and interested to go to sleep."

George looked at her, his young face very serious. "I thought you didn't know anything about those messages, Miss Webb."

"I don't."

"Then why—"

"But when a woman who knows she must soon die goes to the trouble and expense of preparing a set of phonograph messages for her family, so that she can deliver them in her own voice, it strikes me that she must consider those messages vital. I don't know whether you realize that your aunt made the journey to and from the phonograph studio on a stretcher in an ambulance and the strain almost killed her."

"The messages are vital, all right," Catherine Price darkly contributed, with an effect of going over to the enemy. "And I think," she thoughtfully added, "I'm beginning to understand just why Aunt C. C. is send-

ing them this way. She knew that if she wrote to us, we'd tear up the letters, and we'd probably do it before we finished reading them. As it is, she's fixed things so we've simply got to hear them. I didn't like my message any more than Naomi liked hers, but I'm sporting enough to give the old girl credit for turning the trick on us."

"She isn't doing it in a very sporting way," Naomi muttered.

"That's right, too, and she admits it. But we've given her a pretty raw deal ever since we grew up. George and Ethel and Lil and I were always active thorns in her side, and you and Henry ignored her as much as you dared to. Then we all turned up our faces and expected her to kiss us good-by and give us a wad of money when she left the world. Why the devil should she do it? And if she felt that she must do it in the end, why the devil shouldn't she have a little fun with us first?"

"You might get up on the table at this point, Cath," George suggested with a wan grin. "The audience could see you better. And perhaps a few sips of water might refresh you. I've finished all that was in the carafes, but I'm sure Johnson will get you some more. It won't be wasted," he affably assured the butler. "I'll drink all Miss Price doesn't want."

"I know," Catherine said wearily, "you think I'm just drawing on my hot-air tank, and perhaps I am. I don't know, myself, what makes me explode like this. I suppose it's my hang-over. I never liked Aunt

C. C. when she was alive, and I never pretended to. But—oh, well, laugh if you want to—I have a sort of feeling that she's trying to help us!"

"It's the time to laugh, all right," George grimly commented. He was getting back to normal with a rapidity to which he soon accustomed that family circle. After a night of steady drinking and a perceptible hang-over during the breakfast hour, George could emerge at ten o'clock in the morning steady of hand, fresh of complexion and reasonably clear of eye, prepared to "play ball with the planets," as he expressed it.

"Catherine is right," Long said as he put down his napkin and rose from the table. "I happen to know from her own testimony that your aunt is trying to help every one of you."

"Miss Webb doesn't think so," Naomi suddenly remarked.

Long sent a quick look at the nurse and surprised the end of a little smile at the corners of her mouth. It irritated him.

"If Miss Webb knew as much as I do, she would think so," he dryly observed; and as he left the room he had the satisfaction of knowing that the remark had gone home. He had further proof of this that night when the nurse waylaid him in the hall after dinner.

"Can you come into the library for a few minutes' talk?" she asked with more diffidence than she had yet shown, and he went with her willingly. The pro-

gram for the evening, as casually outlined during the dinner talk, was a harmless one. All the young folks were going to a new musical comedy and they were going together. They would have to be back soon after eleven—at least George would, to make his dutiful pilgrimage before midnight—and the rest had announced their intention of coming home with him and having a lunch in the dining-room.

Long was interested to observe how closely they were banding in this new environment. He was sure that they had not done this in the past—that often up till this year the Prices and Dixons had not met for months at a time, while Naomi and Henry had always played lone hands. Already in the Chandler house they were a compact circle, holding together with a desperate grip as if to resist the pressure of outside forces arrayed against them.

He had thought they liked him. Now he knew that Naomi and George regarded him as a potential enemy, and that possibly several or all of the others shared their impression of him. It was due, he believed, to the tactlessness of Miss Webb, a tactlessness with which he was getting somewhat fed up. She had boasted that she would not act like a sleuth, yet she was doing exactly that. He followed her into the library, formally pulled forward a chair for her, seated himself not too near it, and waited for what she had to say.

"You're annoyed with me," she began regretfully.

He looked at her with surprise. This was the most feminine remark she had yet made to him.

"Oh, no," he assured her without emphasis. "A little disappointed, perhaps. Nothing more."

"Why are you disappointed?"

"My dear Miss Webb, I've already told you why, and you asked me to keep my opinions to myself."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, shocked.

"That's certainly what it amounted to. You advised me to keep my eyes open, and you showed that you resented what you considered interference. I told you then that you weren't going at this business in the right way, and I'm ready to repeat it now. You're not only somewhat tactless, but you actually appear to be trying some sort of third degree on these people—"

"What do you mean by that?" she interrupted. "They know they're on probation, and they know, as you yourself told them after dinner the first night they were all here, that you and I are observers and time-keepers. By this time they must realize that they're not only on probation but that they're under suspicion."

"I agree with you," Long said gravely, "and I think it's your manner which has made them feel that."

"But don't you see," she argued without resentment, "that if their consciences were clear they'd never dream they were suspected of anything? And do you imagine that Miss Chandler brought them here to make them

comfortable and happy for six months after giving them that awful jolt about the will? And with the conviction in her mind that one of them poisoned her?"

"We have no proof that Miss Chandler had any such conviction," the lawyer reminded her. "And Cary scoffs at the idea."

"As I said he would." The full significance of his last remark struck her. "You've seen him, then?"

"Of course I've seen him. You brought up an appalling possibility, and such a suspicion in the mind of a nurse who attended a patient must certainly receive attention. I mean to get to the bottom of it and I went to Cary for help."

"Good!" she applauded. "So do I."

"But Cary says that if your patient had any such suspicion, it was because you yourself planted it. And there's a good deal to be said for that theory."

"I see," she murmured. "You're telling me that you agree with him."

"I'm at least considering his point. And I'm convinced that if your manner with Catherine Chandler was as eloquent as it has been since her death, you could suggest all sorts of things to her without saying a word. That smile of yours at breakfast, for example, when I ventured to testify that Miss Chandler was trying to help her family. Her letter to me contained a paragraph I can repeat almost word for word. She said: 'They've got themselves into an appalling impasse. Perhaps from my grave I can do more

for them than I ever did in life. At least I shall try. You must help me.' "

Miss Webb interrupted him.

"Is it possible," she asked, "that you don't see what that means?"

"I don't see that it means murder, and certainly they can't all have poisoned her!" He added more calmly: "I've given you first-hand testimony that Catherine Chandler was trying to help these young people. Yet you're showing now, just as you showed them at the breakfast table, that you think the suggestion is absurd."

"I don't think it's absurd. But I do think it's unfounded."

"Notwithstanding Miss Chandler's own statement, you think it's unfounded?"

"I think you misconstrued it. I don't think she meant the kind of help you and Catherine Price have in mind. I think she wants to help the guilty person to pull himself or herself up to the scratch and clear the others, purely as a family duty. She may have thought that jolt would bring them all to their senses. And of course," the speaker ended thoughtfully, "there's a possibility that two or three of them may be in it."

"I think you are absolutely wrong. If you were right, the revelation would precipitate the very sensation Catherine Chandler was trying to avoid."

"Not necessarily. In fact, not at all. She'll have her own way of handling that, I imagine. That's why I said it would be a family affair."

He shook his head at her. "Your imagination is running away with you. But let's get to the point. There was something special you wanted to say to me?"

"Only that I'm sorry I've annoyed you; or disappointed you," she corrected. "I want to work harmoniously with you." She hesitated a moment, but as he showed no impatience she went on: "So I'm going to tell you something. I loved Catherine Chandler. I suppose that will surprise you, but it's true. She didn't fool me for a moment. I've always been able to see the faults of those I loved, as well as their good points. And Heaven knows I've shown them my faults as well as my good points, too."

"What are your faults?" Long interrupted.

Though she had spoken of herself in passing, it became plain that her thoughts were not on herself. His question pulled her up and she looked startled. Then she flashed so brilliant and friendly a smile at him that his heart warmed under it.

"You've seen plenty of them," she admitted, still smiling; "cock-sureness, over-independence, tactlessness, perhaps. I'm afraid you'll see a lot more as we go on. But I loved Catherine Chandler," she went on seriously, "and I'm absolutely loyal to her memory. The biggest ambition of my life now is to carry out her last wishes."

"It's mine, too," Long admitted. "But I wish to God she had made her last wishes plainer. She said she wanted me to approach the situation with an open

mind, and I'm so confused already that I don't know whether I'm executioner or a kindergarten teacher."

"You'll know," his companion predicted. "You'll know, soon."

For a moment they looked at each other from the new point of view developed by these confidences. Then as if they had strengthened her resolution to make him understand her, she went on.

"Miss Chandler never fooled me," she repeated. "I saw her bitterness, her arrogance, her occasional cruelty. She made me furious a dozen times a day. But she had a wonderful personality and a far finer mind than any other patient I've ever attended. I grew curious, then interested; and finally I became devoted to her. She saw it and at first it amused her," the speaker admitted, "but as time passed I think she saw I was giving her something money can't buy—affection.

"I'd have nursed her for nothing if she had been a poor woman. She hadn't much affection in her life, and I believe mine pleased her after she had time to take it in and think it over. Anyway, it made her realize that she could trust me, and she softened a little; only a very little. She loathed sentiment; but she talked to me much more freely after she accepted the fact that I actually cared for her. And she did accept it. I learned that when she showed her trust in me four days before she died."

As her companion remained silent the speaker ended almost fiercely:

"Catherine Chandler was worth ten thousand of the derelicts she's sheltering here. And when I see them sneer at her and insult her memory, while you look on and smile, I see red! That's why I've lost my head once or twice."

Long listened in amazed silence. He had no doubt of Miss Webb's sincerity, and the revelation also explained the resentful manner he had observed so often.

"I'm glad you were fond of her," he said at last.

"I wasn't fond of her. I tell you I loved her."

"I'm glad you loved her. I very nearly loved her myself, a great many years ago."

"I suspected that. And I know that she loved you, devotedly and not merely as a friend, to the day of her death."

Long straightened out of his lounging position. There was another moment of silence.

"I'm sure you're mistaken," he said at the end of it.

Hope Webb's firm lips curled. "Of course you didn't know it. Men are so blind about such things. But she loved you. I knew it the first day you came to see her, though I saw you together only for a moment before she hustled me out of the room, as she always did when any one came. And the last three months, when you didn't come, I was very near writing you. I knew she missed you and wanted you, horribly."

"As it happened," Long muttered, "she was up to her neck that entire time in things she was keeping from me."

"I know she was. She spoke of that, too. She'd

often say, 'Nicholas wouldn't approve of what I've been doing to-day.'"

"She wrote me to stay away, that she was busy. Did you know what she was doing?"

"Not much of it, but some of it. Naturally, you realize now that she had detectives on the trail of every member of the family."

"Yes, I know that. But it had nothing to do with—"

"No. She engaged them long before there was any suspicion of poisoning. The poisoning was done the last week of her life. And I'm going to find out who did it," Hope Webb added incisively, "if it's the last thing I ever do. In the meantime," she added with a sudden hardening of her jaw-line, "you mustn't expect me to love her murderers."

Long took that evening off and spent it in the writing-room of his pet club. He had meant to play bridge, but Miss Webb had given him too much to think about. At five minutes of twelve he inserted his latch-key into the keyhole of the big front door and slipped into the house, feeling rather like a runner who had just passed under the wire. The sound of the Troubadour's voice, raised in a love-song, drew him along the hall to the dining-room, and he opened the door and glanced in.

The young folks were there, including George, who seemed for the moment to be the center of their interest. He sat in a big chair before the replenished fire, a plate of sandwiches on his knee and a whisky and

soda in his hand. A disarrayed dining-room and the presence of various empty plates on the table with the remains of food on them showed that the others had indulged in a light repast.

The Troubadour was sprawled out in the huge carved chair that held Lily, singing to her while he fed her a sandwich. To Long, Bryce's arms and legs always seemed scattered over the room, so large and ubiquitous was their effect. Like George and Henry, the Troubadour was in immaculate evening dress, and the lawyer wondered where he got the money to pay for his clothes and the small white chrysanthemum in his buttonhole.

Catherine Price was the first of the group to realize the new-comer's presence.

"Hello, Uncle Nicholas! Come in and have a sandwich," she hospitably invited, with a lazy smile at him. Catherine, Long told himself as he accepted the invitation, was now the only member of the group who was really cordial, though only a few short days ago he had fondly fancied himself popular with all its members.

"We've eaten almost everything," Catherine confessed as she brought the sandwich plate to him when he had taken his pet standing position by the fire with an arm on the mantelpiece. "You and George can have what's left. Dickie, for Heaven's sake turn off the vocal gargling for a few minutes and draw in some arms and legs."

The Troubadour turned it off and drew them in.

"You must have got home early," Long said conversationally as he made his selection from the sandwich plate.

The remark was unfortunate. It reminded his hearers of their wrongs, and their faces clouded.

"My God! why wouldn't we?" Lily asked with acid scorn. "Is there any sense in going to a dance from eleven to twelve? Nothing's doing till after midnight, anyway. That rule of Aunt C. C.'s has put a devil of a cramp in our style."

The Troubadour closed her mouth with a kiss, and then put a bit of the sandwich between her lips before she could speak again.

"Besides, to-night George had to get home to make his pious pilgrimage," he pacifically pointed out, as he re-assembled his scattered arms and legs.

The remark gave Long his opening.

"Anything unexpected about it?" he genially asked George.

The boy had been looking very grave. Now his face hardened and he raised to the lawyer a pair of eyes that held a singularly remote expression. But he answered in his usual tone.

"I got an earful. Trust Aunt C. C. not to stage anything stale. I'd like to drop into your room for a moment when we go upstairs, sir," he added, "and have a little talk with you, if you can spare the time."

Long nodded and finished the sandwich.

"But make it as soon as you can," he suggested as he left the room with a general "good night" to the

group. "Midnight's my pet bedtime. That's why the life here agrees with me so well," he added, and mentally kicked himself for a tactless ass.

He was glad the boy was coming up. He had not yet had an intimate talk with any of the youngsters. Indeed, he had never even been alone with one of them, save on the occasion of that brief staircase chat with Catherine. He had been glad to see that they were normal to-night. Evidently there had been very little drinking. But he did not attach too much importance to this temporary restraint. They'd probably break loose again to-morrow.

Back in his room, he made sure that his cigarettes and cigars were within reach of the guest's easy-chair near the fire. He had hardly completed these simple preparations before young Dixon knocked at the door. But when he was seated and had accepted and lit a cigarette, the caller showed himself in no hurry to begin the interview he had suggested. Instead he revealed a knowledgable appreciation of some good pieces of furniture Long had brought with him when he moved to the Chandler house. The host, though he was impressed by the young man's interest in and genuine understanding of his treasures, had no wish to discuss them now. Tactfully but definitely he brought George to the point of his visit; and when he realized that it was unavoidable George drew a deep breath and took the six-barred fence of his purpose with a rush.

"This whole business is so queer, Mr. Long," he

began, leaning forward, crossing his legs and clasping his left silk-clad ankle with his right hand, in a studied affectation of carelessness, "and we're all so much in the dark, that I thought perhaps it would help matters if I told you a few things that happened during the last months of Aunt C. C.'s life."

"Perhaps it would," Long agreed and settled back receptively in his chair on the other side of the fireplace.

"It isn't very easy to put into words," George went on steadily. "And in a way I suppose it's a betrayal of confidence. But the fact is, sir—and I know it's going to shock you—that about six weeks before her death Aunt C. C. asked me to get her a dose that would end things for her! She told me exactly what she wanted—it's rather new in medicine, I believe—and where I could find it."

"What are you telling me?" Long leaned forward quickly, then deliberately relaxed and waited.

"Yes, sir," George continued, "that's exactly what she did. It was just after the visit of the specialists. You know they had given her another year or two. We'd all heard of that and I expected to find her bucked up. Instead, she was all off her feed. She began by saying she supposed the news had given her heirs as big a jolt as it gave her. You know how she talked. She used to say things that froze one's blood. It usually took me two or three sprees to get over a visit to Auntie," he reflectively interpolated. "Of course I said the right things. I said we were glad, and all that, but

she told me not to lie any more than I had to. And then she . . . she . . .”

“Yes?”

“Then she brought it right out,” George said with a quick breath. “She said she thought I was the sort of reckless young devil who might have the nerve to do a thing like that. She made it sound like a bribe. When I showed what I thought of the idea she began to argue in the most cold-blooded way you can imagine. She started a regular discussion; wanted my views; asked if I thought any of the rest would do it for her. I was so flabbergasted I could only jibber. It was a hellish thing to go through.”

The boy stopped and stared into the fire, as if seeing again the scene he described.

“Fancy Aunt C. C. lying there on that infernal chaise longue and asking a fellow to bump her off,” he resumed heavily. “She reminded me that she had already lost the use of her legs and would soon lose the use of her hands and she said they were getting numb, and she asked me what I thought another year or two of life meant under such conditions. She said she had read up on her disease and knew what was ahead of her. It was all a nightmare, and finally I couldn’t stand it any longer, so I got up and stumbled out of the room. But first I made it perfectly clear that there was absolutely nothing doing, for me, along that line.”

“Go on,” said Long.

The young man changed his position and with a hand that shook lit another cigarette.

"That was about the end of it, all right, so far as I was concerned," he resumed. "She brought it up once or twice more, but I guess I'd made her understand. Anyway, she sneered at me and said I hadn't any more nerve than a caterpillar and that she was glad I was crawling away, since I could never have put it over. She said she thought she could find some one with more nerve and discretion."

"Yes?" Long muttered.

"She tackled Ethel next," George went on, and Long mentally nodded. That would be young Dixon's next move, of course—to drag Ethel into the story. And Ethel, he knew, would swear to anything her twin said.

"I guess Aunt C. C. thought she'd better try Ethel because I'd probably tell her, anyway. And she was dead right. I did tell Ethel. So when Aunt C. C. sprung it on her, Ethel was hep to everything and didn't get quite as bad a jolt as I did, though it was awful enough. She told Aunt C. C. to cut it right out; that she couldn't even talk about it. Aunt C. C. was furious and talked so loudly about Ethel's general worthlessness that Miss Webb came in and she sent Ethel away. But the thing knocked Ethel out pretty much the way it had me. We both had the willies for days afterward. Later on, Aunt C. C. tried to persuade us both that she hadn't really meant what she said; but of course we knew better."

Long experienced some difficulty in speaking, but he brought out his next question naturally enough:

"Have you any reason to believe your aunt made that request of any one else?"

"Yes, sir. I know of at least one more, and probably there were others."

"Was Naomi the one you knew about?"

"Yes, sir. How did you guess?"

"Naomi," his host said deliberately, "is a cool young person with plenty of nerve."

The young man gave him a long look between slightly narrowed eyes, and Long asked his next question in a different tone:

"Was Miss Sabin's reaction the same as yours and Ethel's? I mean, did she turn down the proposition?"

"Of course she did!" the boy roughly flung back. "What else do you think she'd do?"

"Then she told you?"

"Yes, she told me. She had to have some safety-valve, just as Ethel and I did. The damned thing was getting on her nerves, just as it got on ours. Something I said one time when I was drunk showed her I'd had the same sort of scene with Aunt C. C. that she'd had, so when I was sober again she tackled me and we compared notes."

The caller stopped now, in the definite manner of one who has said what he came to say, and for a time they smoked in silence. Then Long leaned forward, flicked the ash end of his cigar into a tray on the table between them, and asked another question:

"Just what made you decide to tell me this story, Dixon?"

The young man gave him another long look and frowned as if uncertain what lay under those level tones. He took his time to answer the question.

"From the night we came here there's been something odd in the atmosphere," he said at last. "It isn't . . . well, it isn't normal, if you know what I mean. There's been a kind of . . . I don't know what to call it . . . a kind of thick fog of suspicion hanging over us. It's getting on our nerves. It's making us imagine things."

"What things?" The tone was so casual that his guest looked relieved.

"Oh, queer things . . . horrible things," he said more naturally. "You know Aunt C. C. died pretty suddenly at the last. And we've actually wondered if . . . if perhaps some one got it for her . . . and if perhaps you and Miss Webb know it was done and are trying to find out who did it. It's awful for us, Mr. Long. We feel that we can't stay here, and we know we can't leave. We're between the devil and the deep sea."

He waited for a comment, but none came and he went on with something like a gulp:

"Perhaps—this struck us, too—perhaps Aunt C. C. changed her mind after it was done and thought she'd been murdered. But . . . it wouldn't be murder, would it, to put a woman out of her suffering at her own request? She said, herself, it wouldn't be," he rushed on. "She said doctors did it sometimes, when they knew patients couldn't endure any more. I've just read

a book about a son who was a doctor killing his father that way. And Ethel said she read a story once about a trained nurse who killed a woman patient to save her any more suffering . . . when she knew the woman couldn't get well."

The young man was talking now for the sheer relief of words; talking like one who could not stop. Aside from the babble of his voice and the occasional snap of blazing firewood, the room was strangely quiet, as if it listened. The babble stopped at last and Long spoke.

"George," he said quietly, "have you and Naomi had a secret marriage?"

The young man actually jumped. "A secret—why, no, sir! Of course we haven't. What—"

"Shouldn't you have had one?"

This time the youth left his chair and reached the other man's side in three long strides.

"Just what do you mean by that?" he cried fiercely.

"I'm asking you if you two are living together, or if you have been."

He saw the youth's fist clench, and watched his struggle for self-control.

"And I'm telling you," George said at last in a loud voice, "that you're a damned, interfering spy, and that if you insult Naomi Sabin again I'll wring your neck, even if you are old enough to be my father. God knows I want to marry Naomi," he added more quietly. "I've wanted her for two years. But she won't have me. Get that into your thick head, for it's true."

Long leaned back in his chair and looked up at the contorted face.

"Be quiet," he ordered. "Do you want to stir up the household? You're acting like a fool. And get it into *your* head," he emphasized as the young man strode back to the fireplace, "that I'm not insulting Naomi. I have admired her very much. But you're both in a difficult situation and I'm trying to get to the bottom of it. There's no use talking any more about it to-night, though," he added with a sigh. "Calm down and go to bed, and we'll take the matter up again in a day or two. You see," he ended, as George, whose back was toward him, did not move, "I happen to know that you've been living out at Naomi's chicken farm for months."

This time young Dixon wheeled to face him.

"What of it?" he asked furiously. "Ethel was there, too."

"Only part of the time. In fact, very little of the time."

"Well . . . there was some one else there; some one that made it all right."

"Who was it?"

"That's just what I can't tell you."

"I thought you couldn't."

Suddenly the young man became a frightened boy. He dropped into the easy-chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, what a hell of a world this is!" he burst out. "It never occurred to us that any one would know I'd

been there or would be rotten enough to suspect . . . But Aunt C. C. said the same things you've just said, in that damned message of hers to-night."

"Why shouldn't people suspect?" Long asked quietly. "Your reputation isn't the sort that protects a young girl who was constantly seen with you and is evidently in love with you, and who finally takes you under her own roof. What do you think her neighbors imagined? Couldn't you think of that . . . for her sake?" As George took this in silence, he repeated his earlier admonition. "Hustle off to bed," he wearily advised. We'll go into all this again when we have more time for it."

Young Dixon got up and stood looking at him for a moment, groping for words that would not come. The anger died out of his expression, and his face looked old and haggard.

"Oh, all right," he said at last and turned vaguely toward the door. "You'll let me know when you want to talk it over?" he asked from the threshold. Long followed him and put a hand on his sagging shoulder.

"Of course."

For a moment he remained by the open door, letting the light of his room illumine the way of the dazed figure. When George had vanished among the shadows of the hall, Long closed the door, but he stood still for a long time, staring absently at its polished panel.

CHAPTER IX

THE STRANGER AT NAOMI'S

NAOMI'S chicken farm was twenty-five miles from the Chandler house, on the other side of Waterford. When Long entered its side driveway late the next afternoon it had, at a casual glance, the appearance of a deserted place. The front door and windows were boarded up and the small white farmhouse looked cold and empty. It was in excellent condition, however, and the visitor reflected that it must be a rather charming place in the summer. He stopped his roadster and for a few moments sat quietly looking the place over. Then, seeing a curving line of smoke mounting from a rear chimney, he nodded and jumped out of his car.

"Now we'll see if we can get to the bottom of all this," he muttered, and going to the kitchen door, he assailed its stout woodwork with vigorous knuckles.

There was a long interval. He continued his assault and at last heard the sound of deliberate steps on the kitchen floor. The door opened and a gingham-clad country woman with gray hair, a flat, pushed-in face and closely set lips, surveyed him with severe disapproval.

"We don't want to buy nothin'," she tersely announced.

"That's lucky, for I haven't anything to sell," Long smiled. "I want to see the man of the house."

"There ain't no man of the house." As the caller seemed surprised by this statement, she added frigidly, "There ain't never been." The door was closing. "A lady owns this farm and she's away," the woman ended.

"Yes, I know." Long casually rested an arm against the jamb at an angle that made it impossible for the woman to shut the door without crushing his bones. "I saw her this morning. Now I've come to see the gentleman."

"You mean . . . she sent you?" For an instant the guardian spirit of the farm wavered.

"I'm here, you see. If you will kindly take my name to the gentleman . . ."

He left the sentence unfinished, but his look was one to inspire confidence as he watched the changing expression of the woman's face. The caution in her triumphed.

"I dunno what you mean," she said at last. "There ain't no man here, and Miss Sabin's away."

Long looked over her plump shoulders into the kitchen and to the hall beyond it. He fancied he saw a figure lurking in the hall shadows.

"Is he taking a nap? I don't mind waiting if you can't risk disturbing him."

His insistence irritated the caretaker. She faced him

deliberately, hands on hips, elbows at an uncompromising angle.

"Get out!" she ordered, and again she tried to close the door. He ignored the movement.

"I've brought him a box of cigars," he said conversationally, but in a penetrating voice.

"Cigars, did you say? The word is music. Don't keep the gentleman out in the cold, Hebe. The merest glance will show you he should be treated as an honored guest."

The man who had been listening in the hall now crossed the kitchen and extended a hand to the lawyer with the air of one who has entertained princes. It was a superb gesture, greatly blurred, however, by his appearance. He was a good-looking, well-set-up man in his early forties, but his costume seemed to consist of bedroom slippers and a soiled bath-robe. His hair was unbrushed and his pallid face was unshaven. There was a suggestion that it was also unwashed. But he was smiling with such jaunty good humor and such a friendly display of strong white teeth that Long returned the smile without great effort as he took the hand.

"Stand aside, Hebe," the host directed, "and you might throw in a respectful bow as the gentleman passes. He's Mr. Nicholas Long, a distinguished light of the American bar and a friend of our dear Miss Naomi and of our dear Mr. George."

"I'm surprised that you remember me," the lawyer admitted as he followed his host through the kitchen,

along the hall, and into the dim front parlor of the farm-house.

"Merely a case of intelligent observation, old chap. We met but once in the dear dead days that are no more, but you haven't changed much. I recognized you through an upstairs window as soon as you turned into the yard. Naturally, callers interest me. And I infer that your visit has something to do with Naomi, and with Catherine's interesting experiment, and that interests me, too. I assume you came in peace and not in war. Still, I might not have given myself the pleasure of this chat if you hadn't spoken so seductively of cigars."

As he talked with an animation that revealed inner nervousness the man dropped into a chair opposite his guest, drew the sides of the shabby bath-robe together over his knees, and gazed smilingly at the older man.

"You'll forgive the informality of my attire," he added as an unimportant afterthought. "As you see, I'm not dressed to receive. In fact, I'm just out of bed. There's nothing to do but sleep, in this benighted hole. You're my first visitor in six months, if I except George and Ethel; and of course Naomi and I regard them as members of the family."

"I wasn't at all sure you'd see me," Long admitted, glancing around the cold little room with its shuttered windows and empty fireplace.

"It isn't discreet, I suppose, and I admit that for a moment your appearance gave me something of a jolt. But Hebe's presence doesn't really constitute a

full social life, and I'm rather fed up here. If you'll produce some of those cigars you mentioned just now, they may help us toward a better understanding."

Long drew the box from the pocket of the heavy overcoat he had not taken off and handed it to his host, and the latter split the revenue stamps with an avid thumb-nail, opened the box, and tore the protecting silver foil from its contents. He offered the box to his caller, but he had no matches, and Long produced his lighter and held it to the host's cigar before he lighted his own. The man drew in a deep mouthful of smoke and exhaled a long, contented sigh.

"The first perfect cigar I've had in years," he cheerfully admitted. "One whiff of it convinces me that it doesn't really matter why you came, since you're here with these. If you had happened to bring a flask, the occasion would be perfect. But of course you didn't," he added sadly, as Long shook his head. "Perhaps the next time—"

"There won't be any next time." Long spoke with so sudden a change of tone that the other raised his heavy black eyebrows. His hair and eyebrows were as straight and black as Naomi's, but he had not her vividly blue eyes. His were brown. They widened a trifle now under the caller's words. "You've got to get out of here, Sabin, and you've got to get out quick," Long added.

"My dear fellow, this is so sudden," his host complained with a deprecating smile.

"Out you go," Long repeated. "You've been robbing that girl for six months, and you've bled her white. She has nothing left, so you're going while the going is good."

"Oh, but it isn't so good, old chap. That's just the point. And you're spoiling a superb cigar for me by these unreasonable suggestions," the other murmured discontentedly.

"We'll drop all the Handsome Harry stuff," Long contemptuously assured him. "It doesn't impress me at all. I'm a lawyer, and you know perfectly well that I know all about you. In twenty-four hours I could have you back behind the bars, where you belong, and you know that, too."

"But you won't," his host said gently. "It's because I knew you wouldn't that I gave you this hospitable reception."

"No, I don't think I will, just yet," the lawyer agreed. "I have another plan for you."

"I hope it's a good one."

"It's an excellent one, and it's going to have your enthusiastic coöperation."

"I'm not impulsive," Harry Sabin reminded him.

"Perhaps not, but you're going to act as if you were, for the next few hours. You see," the caller added with a sudden eye-flash that made his companion look thoughtful, "I'm not talking through my hat. I really know your entire record. I've been Catherine Chandler's lawyer for thirty years. I remember her sister Jane's marriage to you, and Naomi's birth, and

the various scandalous episodes in which you figured from then on. I was one of those the prison authorities notified of your escape after we all thought you were safely up for twenty years, and I've been on the lookout for you ever since. I suspected that Naomi was helping you, but it was only last night that I knew definitely you'd had the nerve to come here. I've spent the entire day on your affairs."

"So good of you," the listener murmured; but now his look was as menacing as the visitor's.

"I've bought a nice first-class ticket to South America for you," Long went on. "You're sailing on a good ship and in a comfortable outside state-room, and you're sailing to-night. I'll drive you to the steamer myself—we can make it in three hours—and I'll linger close by the gang-plank till that steamer starts."

He waited a moment, but his companion did not speak. He merely took his cigar out of his mouth and looked thoughtfully at the end of it.

"I needn't point out to a man of your intelligence that freedom in South America is better than prison here," Long went on. "It's also better than hiding in this house, blackmailing your daughter. Blackmailing is what it amounts to," he contemptuously added as the other's face darkened. "Naomi isn't hiding you here for love of you. She knows exactly what a hound you are, and she's tolerating this situation to prevent the whole wretched scandal from being reopened. But your little plan of sitting pretty and grafting on what

she may get from her aunt's estate can't be carried out."

"You think it can't?" Sabin softly inquired.

"I know it can't. Come now, use your brains. I'm taking a chance and advancing some of Naomi's possible inheritance for your fare and a starting stake. South America is full of opportunities and congenial companions for a man of your peculiar gifts. Here in the States you'd always be a hunted felon even if I left you at large, which I most certainly shall not do unless you meet my terms."

He watched the other's face and drove home his final inducement:

"I don't doubt that if Naomi does get something from the Chandler estate, she'll be glad to make you a reasonable allowance to keep you on another continent."

"How much?" Sabin asked with dawning interest.

"Not a big sum, I assure you. I'm not going to have any more bleeding. I shall advise her to allow you a maximum of, say, two thousand a year."

Sabin laughed.

"In South America you can live on that like a fighting-cock. Now don't try to bargain," the lawyer impatiently added, as his companion shook his head. "I'm dealing with you very handsomely, and you've sense enough to see it. In the long run it would be infinitely better for Naomi if I turned you over to the law without consulting her, and I'm very much inclined to do it. The law doesn't like to have expert

forgers at large, you know. So take my proposition or leave it. There's to be no haggling."

"How large is the stake you mention, may I ask?"

"A thousand dollars, in addition to your traveling expenses."

"All right, we're off." Sabin rose, with a genial smile. "Give me time to make a toilet more worthy of a gentleman of fortune—say fifteen minutes—and I'll be with you. You're really a messenger of the gods, old chap. That's the real reason why I received you to-day. I was sure something would come of it. All I've been waiting for was enough money to get out of this hole. Naomi's been trying to raise an extra thousand for weeks, but she hasn't had any luck. As to what I'll get from Naomi later on, that's a matter you'll have nothing whatever to do with. So we needn't discuss it."

"Fifteen minutes," the lawyer concisely agreed and turned his back on him. He heard the door snap shut as Sabin hurried from the room.

The man was gone half an hour and Long spent the interval in somber thought. Never before had he deliberately broken faith with the laws of his country, and he had done it now in behalf of a man he believed to be without a redeeming quality. Harry Sabin had broken his wife's heart. He had disgraced his own excellent family and had tarnished the Chandler escutcheon. Now he was wrecking his daughter's life as he had wrecked her mother's. He was the "burden" to which Catherine Chandler had referred in her letter.

Evidently she had learned through her detectives that some man was lying low at the chicken farm, and, knowing that Sabin was at large, she had easily guessed the rest.

With her horror of scandals and an especial horror of this one, it was not to be expected that she would give the man up. Yet she might have financed an effort to get him out of the country. What Long could not understand was why she had not done this. With the money furnished, Naomi could have done all Long was now doing—could have bought the ticket under an assumed name, could have driven her father to the nearest sailing port for South America, could have got rid of him. But probably Naomi was afraid to mention the matter to her aunt. No one ever knew what Catherine Chandler's reactions would be to an appeal.

When Sabin came back, his appearance did credit to the full half-hour he had devoted to its improvement. He was bathed, shaved and immaculate. He wore an excellently cut business suit, a handsome overcoat now flung open but with a collar that would turn high around his face, a new steamer cap, gray kid gloves, and a pair of shoes whose luster almost reflected Long's face when he looked down on them. In his hands Sabin carried a new suitcase and a new patent-leather hat-box.

"All ready, you see," he announced cheerfully. "Naomi fitted me out as soon as I got here, at my suggestion, of course, and we've simply been waiting

for a good break such as this you're giving me, old man. Awfully kind of you, I must say."

"Don't thank me. You know I'm not doing this for you. If you're ready, come on."

Long started toward the front door, but Sabin called him back.

"Can't open that," he reminded the other. "It's locked and barred and bolted. We're not supposed to open the back one, either, except at night, which is the time I sneak out and take my exercise. Of course Hebe doesn't know why we have to be so careful."

"How does Naomi explain your presence, to her?"

"Hebe thinks that federal officers are after me for bootlegging. It's an avocation she has a profound sympathy for. Let's go out humbly through the kitchen, old man, as befits our nefarious enterprise."

He was plainly in high spirits, and Long was glad of that. It would make the next three hours easier. Under the caretaker's widening eyes they passed through the kitchen. At the door Sabin suddenly turned, went back, caught the woman's plump shoulders in both hands, and gave her a resounding smack on each retreating cheek.

"Something to color your dreams, Hebe," he called back as he hurried out, while she sputtered with indignation. "It's the only parting gift I can make you, but it should be enough for any maiden. Fare thee well, and if forever, still forever fare thee well. . . . She was a pretty good old scout," he informed Long as he threw the hat-box and case into the roadster and

took the seat next the driver's. "She looks like the wrath of God, but I have a growing suspicion that she has a kind heart. There were even several embarrassing indications of late that she was succumbing to my *beaux yeux*."

"We won't go into that, if you don't mind," Long said with distaste.

"Oh, she didn't. She continued modest and virginal to the end. But there was a late lark singing in her heart, just the same, though I admit that its notes were a trifle adenoidal."

They were out on the highway now, and Long sent the car along the open road at forty miles an hour. A three-hour chat with this companion held no lure for him, but he at once discovered that neither did it hold strain. Sabin monologued contentedly. All he asked was a listener. Finding his companion uninterested in "the sex," he discoursed on South America, which it appeared he had been reading up. "Naomi got the books and maps for me at the library," he interpolated. He was a good talker and as intelligent as he was unmoral. To his own surprise Long became interested, and finally took his share in a dialogue.

They reached their seaport destination soon after eight o'clock. But the ship was not to sail till eleven, and the prospect of another three hours of companionship had an effect on Long which his companion recognized.

"You needn't wait till she goes," he suggested with a gracious wave of the hand. "I give you my word as

a scholar and a gentleman that I'll be on board and probably asleep in my innocence when she pulls out."

"No, I've set my heart on seeing you hanging over the deck-rail, waving your handkerchief at me," Long told him. And the voyager, realizing that he meant it, changed the subject.

"Then let's have a good dinner on shore," Sabin urged. "We won't get any decent food or service on the boat at this hour, and I haven't had a good meal for years, except what Naomi or Hebe cooked for me. They're no chefs, either. You must be as hungry as a wolf, too. We'll find the best place in town and seek a retired corner there. It's safe enough," he added almost irritably, as Long looked dubious.

"All right, if you care to take the risk," the lawyer decided. "You'll be off our hands," he ended, "which-ever takes you, law or steamer."

Sabin shook his head. "A tactless remark," he pointed out; but it depressed him for a moment.

When they had found the best restaurant and the retired corner, Long took in with dispassionate interest the eagerness of his companion. Sabin was like a school-boy out on a holiday lark.

"The dinner is mine, of course," Long told him, "but would you like to order it?"

"Would I like to?" Sabin echoed unctuously. "The question confirms my growing suspicion, Long, that you really have a heart."

For the next ten minutes he brooded over the menu, while Long studied their fellow-guests in the restau-

rant. There were not more than a dozen of these, but the number included several pretty girls, one of whom was Naomi's type. He might point out that resemblance to Naomi's father a little later, and, the topic thus introduced, it might be possible to learn just what the girl had undergone since that gentleman's abrupt arrival under her roof. The lawyer understood why she had brought young Dixon there. He was the only person she could trust, and she had not dared to be alone with the debonair brute who sat opposite him. . . .

Suddenly Sabin seemed to read his thoughts.

"Dixon was no company for me at the farm," he critically mentioned. "You'd think the young ass would have had sense enough to bring some supplies to me, some decent cigars and whisky. Not he! He smoked his cigars himself, and when he simply had to get drunk he went back to town for a day or two and Ethel stayed with Naomi. They all treated me as if I were an adder," he ended dispassionately, and turned away to give the order to a waiter who hastened forward at his nod.

The meal he ordered was not inspired, but it was good: deep-sea oysters on the half-shell, a clear soup, filet mignon with fresh mushrooms and potatoes au gratin, hearts of lettuce salad with Russian dressing, camembert, toasted biscuits and coffee.

"My tastes have necessarily grown simple, in the past ten years," he confided to Long. With one exception it was his sole reference to his enforced retire-

ment. The exception concerned his hands, on which the nails were broken and blackened. "Too much outdoor exercise," he said, flushing, when he saw Long glance at them.

He disappeared from the table for a few moments and followed the head waiter to some lair in the rear of the establishment. Subsequently cocktails were served in tea-cups, and high-balls were set before them modestly flanked by half-empty ginger-ale bottles. Long declined these beverages; he was very careful what and where he drank. But Sabin consumed his own and the other man's share, pronounced the drinks excellent, and became confidential.

"You're an understanding chap, Long," he said when his second high-ball was half gone, "so you must have some notion of what it means to me to eat a good meal again in the company of a man of the world. It's an experience I haven't had for ten years."

"Too bad George disappointed you," Long ironically observed. "You say he was at the farm most of the time?"

"Yes, he was usually underfoot. He could have been amusing if he hadn't annoyed me so much. Besides, he's mad about Naomi; much good it will do him," he contemptuously interjected. "I needn't mention to a man of your acumen that when a chap's in love his sense of humor goes into hibernation. Young George was a good deal of a bore. Then he and Naomi have both been frightfully upset of late, quite aside from the strain of my company, which they openly detested."

"Money, probably," said Long, seizing the opening. "You didn't leave much of Naomi's chicken farm to her, did you?"

Sabin shook his head at him.

"That question is in devilishly bad taste, under the circumstances," he mentioned; but he answered the remark itself with his usual candor. "Of course Naomi had to mortgage her farm after I came," he confessed, "to raise the money for my get-away. I'd promised it to the pals that helped me and I regarded it as a debt of honor," he piously added. "That's why two more men were able to get out soon afterward. One was taken again, but the other is still going strong, somewhere. I'd just as soon our paths didn't cross in the future," he confessed reflectively. "He did me one good turn, but he was a nasty customer, in for murder."

"That couldn't have taken all the money Naomi has been raising," Long pointed out, ignoring these casual details. "I know she has even pawned a valuable ring Miss Chandler gave her."

"It took all she could raise," Sabin indifferently admitted. "You have to make big promises when you have no cash; an' keep 'em, too, or you'll be done in sooner or later for not doing it. Then, of course, I had to have this outfit and be all ready to start when the chance came. But why the devil are we talking about that?" he added with sudden irritation. "It's a hell of a topic for a joyful occasion."

"Why do you think George is loving in vain?"

Having learned what he wanted to know, Long was willing to follow this strong hint: "I thought Naomi loved him."

"So she does. You seem to be infernally well posted. How did you catch on?"

"I've seen them together lately."

"You could see them together every day for a year and not catch on. That pair don't wear their hearts on their sleeves. Even I didn't catch on till I overheard them powwowing one night. Naomi thinks marriage isn't for her," he added carelessly. "Doesn't want to bring children into the world that are the offspring of a drunkard and the grandchildren of a convict. Told George so in those very words. The things young folks talk about nowadays make a man sit up," he virtuously added. "When I compare them with the careful stepping I had to do toward Jane Chandler . . . However, that's neither here nor there. Naomi will never marry, and I'm glad of it. I don't want any little Dixon brats pulling at her purse-strings."

"You really are about the limit, Sabin," Long dispassionately commented. "Haven't you any affection at all for the girl, or at least any gratitude?"

Sabin shrugged his shoulders. "I was sure you had a heart. You're a sentimentalist, too. Naomi's all right. But there's no bunk between her and me. I know damned well the only reason she's helping me is to avoid more scandal, and she knows the only reason I look her up is to make use of her. Naomi isn't my type. She's the kind whose infernal virtue would make a

man like me shoot himself if he thought too much of her. George is in luck not to get her, if he only knew it. She's set herself to reform him, though, and she'll do it before she's through, if he doesn't watch out.

"I'll say for her that she's got pluck and the perseverance of a bull-dog, and I admire those qualities. She'd rather have had a python in the house than her father, and she let me see it. But she stood up to me every time I started something. I started something pretty often," he ended simply. "Life was so cursed monotonous. I had to have a little excitement."

Long summoned the waiter and asked for the check.

"Must we go?" his guest objected, and hurriedly gulped down the last of a liquid he had been assured was cherry brandy.

"Yes. It's almost ten, and the boat sails at eleven."

Long paid the check, tipped the waiter, and led the way out of the restaurant. He was afraid that if he had to look at Sabin any more, or listen to his talk, he'd step on him.

They walked back to the ship. That killed some time; and as soon as they were on board, Sabin inspected and approved his outside state-room. In that refuge Long gave him his money and tickets.

"Let there be no mistake about this, Sabin," he said with an eye-flash that made the other blink. "This is your one last chance. If you come back I'll have you in prison in twenty-four hours. A little scandal, which people will soon forget, won't be half so hard on Naomi as years of grafting and the strain of wonder-

ing what you're up to. I'm willing to try her way this time, but never again."

"And you can be such a charming companion when you like!" Sabin sighed. "However, be calm. I have no intention of coming back. It's too risky. Later, when Naomi gets her money, I may take a little run over to Paris and Vienna and Budapest, but I think my permanent headquarters will be in the Argentine."

"An excellent place for them," the lawyer approved. "But don't be too sure of that Chandler money, Sabin. It will be within my discretion to divert it, I think."

"And I predict that you'll be too discreet to do anything of the sort. Meantime, there's the first whistle, old man. If it had sounded an hour ago, I'd have burst into tears, but now I really feel that I can part with you."

Long shook hands with him, went down the gang-plank, and waited at the base of it till it was lifted and the line of water widened between boat and shore. Then without a backward glance he hurried to the garage where he had left the roadster, and ruthlessly interrupted the nap of a resentful foreman, standing over the man while the necessary supplies of oil and gasoline were being put in.

It was a good night for driving, but even with the best of luck he couldn't reach the Chandler house till three o'clock. So he'd spend the night in his club. His obligation to be at home by midnight was merely a sentimental one. "At home!" The irony of that stung him. Nevertheless, he was glad to feel that Catherine

would approve his night's work. He suddenly felt that he owed a good deal to Catherine.

On his way to his office the next morning Long stopped at the Satterlee Hospital and sent his card to a rising young surgeon he knew there.

"I'm sorry to bother you at this hour, Doctor," he apologized as they shook hands, "but I won't keep you more than five minutes."

Doctor Grant, who was very impressive in an operating outfit which lacked only the mask, showed an artless relief at this.

"Sit down," he urged with belated hospitality. "I operate in fifteen minutes, but till then—"

"I just want to ask you a couple of questions about a nurse who used to be here," Long said hurriedly. "A Miss Webb—Hope Webb. Do you remember her?"

"Perfectly. A fine-looking girl. All the internes were in love with her, and most of the staff. But that's neither here nor there. If you want a good nurse you couldn't do better than to get her."

"I don't want a nurse. But she's in the same household I'm in just now, and I want to know something about her."

Grant met the caller's eyes and checked a grin.

"What do you want to know?" he briskly demanded.

"Two things. I'm very favorably impressed by her, but she's in a position of considerable trust in a family of young people. I want to know whether her reputa-

tion is all it should be and whether she has any bad habits, such as drugs or drink."

"Drugs or drink! Good Lord, no! Where did you get that notion?"

"It was passed on to me by a woman who hates Miss Webb. I think she was lying."

"You can bet your hat she was lying. You have only to look at Miss Webb to see that she's as wholesome as she is handsome. As to her reputation, it's A-One. She comes of mighty good stock, too, and she's a college graduate."

"I thought as much. There's only one more point. Did she leave here under any sort of cloud?"

"She left a cloud of gloom over the young internes," the surgeon chuckled. "Everybody was sorry to see her go, and we tried hard to keep her. She was forging right ahead here. But she was tired of hospital work, said it was too monotonous. Said she was going in exclusively for private nursing. She was nursing some rich old maid, the last I heard."

"Thanks." Long got up, amazed by the quality of his relief. He had not believed Mrs. Price's charges, of course he hadn't, but to have them so thoroughly disproved sent up his spirits with a rush. "That's all I need. I was sure she was all she seemed, but it was common sense to make the inquiry."

"Of course. Look in again some day."

"No, I'll keep out of this hygienic hive and try to get you down to the club for dinner some night."

"Great! So long. I've got the prettiest little operation ahead of me you ever saw. A case of—" But Long had escaped.

He had been in his office less than ten minutes when Naomi Sabin's card was brought in. He received her at once.

"Why this sudden formality, Naomi?" he reproachfully inquired as they shook hands.

He was at a loss to understand her call. Surely she had not had time to go to the chicken farm and learn from Hebe of her father's departure. He seated her opposite him and leaned back in his big desk chair with the air of a man who had empty hours before him.

"It's good of you to see me, Mr. Long," Naomi began. (No "Uncle Nicholas" this morning!) "But I want to talk to you about a business matter, so I thought I'd better come to your office."

"Quite right," he genially assured her, and waited.

Naomi was looking badly. Dark circles under those tragic eyes of hers, and a chalky pallor. She probably had not slept well. He gathered that her mission was a hard one. But the courage of which her father had spoken was intact.

"What I want to know," she began quietly, "is whether I can get a loan of a thousand dollars on my expectations; or have I any expectations?" As he did not speak, she added breathlessly: "I need the money, terribly. I've simply got to raise it somewhere. You see—" a wave of color flooded her face and slowly receded again—"when I heard of Aunt Catherine's

death, I was so sure I'd get some money that I . . . I committed myself to a definite agreement."

"What made you so sure, Naomi?" The lawyer asked the question very gently, but he saw that it startled her. She grew paler.

"Why . . . I . . . it was always understood, in a way," she faltered. "Anyway, I must have a thousand dollars. I simply must!"

"No, you mustn't, Naomi."

She rose with a rush, as if in response to a powerful spring that moved her. Then, as she stood looking at him, her face became a mask of hopelessness.

"You mean," she asked slowly, "that you can't let me have the money?"

"No. I mean that you don't need it. I myself bought a ticket to South America for your father, and I saw him off last night on the *Argentine*. He won't trouble you any more. That's why I didn't get home before curfew," he added smilingly. He watched her taking in his words, striving to get hold of their incredible meaning.

"You . . ." she began and stopped.

"Your aunt left word that I was to help you," he explained. "Evidently she learned that he was here—"

"I told her," Naomi said dully. "I told her two months before she died. I asked her to help me. She . . . she wouldn't, then. Oh, if she only had!"

Long drummed on the arms of his desk chair and watched her. He had looked forward to Naomi's relief under the shifting of her burden. Instead of show-

ing it, she dropped into her seat, turned away from him, and with a gesture of despair buried her face in her hands, a shoulder raised to ward off sympathy or understanding. She was not weeping. She seemed beyond tears. She was merely, for a black moment, turning her back on life.

CHAPTER X

MISS CONNOLLY REMEMBERS

YOUNG and pretty women were not frequent callers at Nicholas Long's office, and the face of the office boy when he brought in another card, ten minutes after Naomi's departure, showed that he appreciated the innovation. His expression nicely conveyed emotions of surprise, admiration and an oppressive knowingness.

Long frowned at the card unrecognizingly for a moment, then nodded. Under the engraved name of Mrs. Warren Mason he had discovered a modest and faintly penciled explanatory line. It read, "Formerly Miss Connolly—Miss Chandler's night-nurse."

"Show her in," he told the boy, and the lad responded with a promptness that betrayed the lady's waiting presence on the threshold. Long rose to receive Mrs. Mason, née Connolly, who proved to be a small, fresh-faced, attractive young woman, wearing the shiningly new raiment of a bride. She smiled up at him with a deprecating expression.

"I guess you know why I'm here," she suggested.

"I think I do," he affably admitted. "You want that new living-room furniture. Sit down and I'll give you the check for it."

Her smile gave way to amazement. "Good gracious! how did you know about that?"

"Miss Webb mentioned it, casually, in passing."

"Oh!" She considered this for an instant as she seated herself, and then dropped Miss Webb from her mind so definitely that Long almost heard her fall. "I thought maybe as it wasn't in the will . . . I understand Miss Chandler gave you the money . . ."

"Of course. That's all right. I've been expecting you every day."

"We've been away on our wedding journey. We didn't get back till last night."

It was quite plain that in her marriage the new Mrs. Mason was realizing all her girlish dreams. She diffused a soft radiance, an emanation of happiness that filled the office. She took the check he now gave her and dropped it into her hand-bag with a little laugh of pleasure.

"That was awfully good of Miss Chandler," she said gratefully. "It means so much to us now. You see, my husband is a young doctor just beginning his practice, and of course his income is uncertain. It was really a big risk for us to marry."

"You must have been glad of those extra checks during the last six months," the lawyer suggested with a straight look at her.

The blow seemed to hit her between the eyes. She actually fell back in her chair under the impact of it. Then she stiffened and laughed.

"I should say I was, though I couldn't really feel

that I earned them," she said rather breathlessly. "Miss Chandler was so quiet at night. Still, I guess I was useful to her, and I've practically furnished our new apartment with her money."

"She'd be glad of that." He didn't know whether she would or not, but of course it was the thing to say. Mrs. Mason, too, seemed to experience a momentary doubt, but she rose superior to it.

"Yes," she corroborated, and now she spoke quite naturally, "I really feel that in a way all our furniture is a present from her. It's lovely, too, the best of everything. I got the sort that lasts a lifetime: nice mahogany pieces made on the old lines; Oriental rugs—You know what I mean."

"Yes, it must be charming. Don't go just yet," Long added as she started to rise. "Ever since Miss Chandler's death I've wanted to ask you a few questions, and I should have sent for you in a few days if you hadn't dropped in." He leaned forward in his big swivel chair and smiled at her encouragingly. "Will you be quite frank with me?"

"Why . . . yes . . . of course, Mr. Long."

But the soft radiance had departed. The happy eyes of his visitor clouded suddenly. She looked uneasy and a trifle stubborn.

"I suppose you've heard of the little experiment Miss Chandler is making on us all?" he went on, to put her at her ease.

"You mean you're all living together? Yes, there was something about that in the newspapers. But I

didn't know whether it was true, or what it meant if it was true."

"It's true enough," Long said grimly, "and we're not quite sure, ourselves, just what it means. Miss Chandler had some odd ideas, you know."

"I'll say she had!" Mrs. Warren Mason muttered with justifiable faith in the eloquent modulations of her voice.

"She's left me a hard job, and I need all the help I can get. So I wish you'd tell me frankly and confidentially if anything queer . . . unusual . . . happened during the last few months of Miss Chandler's life."

"Queer and unusual things were always happening," his caller willingly testified. She seemed relieved by the turn the conversation had taken. "Miss Chandler was seeing entirely too many people every day. She never saw more than one at a time, of course, but it used to make Miss Webb furious, because the patient hadn't the vitality for that sort of thing. Miss Webb and I couldn't stop it, for we had none of the authority nurses usually have over a patient in her condition. No one had any authority over her. That was queer, in itself."

"Not very queer, when one considers that Catherine Chandler was the patient," Long murmured wearily.

"Well, it seemed queer to us. She did exactly as she pleased, from start to finish, and of course she wore herself out and died before she needed to. I

could see how tired she always was when I came on at six, but I didn't realize at first all that was going on. Several of the constant callers were supposed to come on investment business, but I knew it wasn't that."

"You thought it wasn't?"

"I was sure it wasn't. The two men that came so much, Mr. Jackson and Mr. White, were supposed to be her brokers, but they didn't look or act like brokers. I've nursed a lot of brokers and I know the types."

Long nodded contentedly. He knew now that, contrary to Miss Webb's opinion, the little night-nurse had not been too love-obsessed to keep her eyes open.

"When did you see them? You weren't there in the daytime, of course."

"No, but I . . . I . . ." Her self-conscious manner had returned, and now it was mingled with fear. She had stupidly given him an opening and he had taken it, and she was afraid of what it might lead to.

"Come now," he said gently. "Tell me the whole story."

"There's nothing to tell," she faltered.

"Oh, yes there is. There's a good deal to tell." As she still hesitated, he regretfully put on the screws he had in readiness. "For example, you must tell me why Miss Chandler gave you all those various checks, including one for two hundred dollars. I found them," he added pleasantly, giving the caller time to think, "among her canceled vouchers when I looked them

over. She gave them all to you within two months of her death. There were more than a dozen checks made out to you in addition to your salary checks."

His visitor moistened her lips.

"There's nothing to be frightened about," Long said gently. "I'm sure you earned the money, but I'd like very much to know just how you did it."

Mrs. Warren Mason found her voice and some measure of assurance.

"The small checks were for little commissions I did for Miss Chandler, shopping and such things, in the daytime. I was free every afternoon and I attended to a number of matters for her."

Long nodded again. This, of course, was entirely plausible.

"But how about the two-hundred-dollar check, made out by you and signed by her? At least, I assume it was made out by you. The handwriting on the face of the check and the endorsement are the same as they were on all the other checks."

"That," young Mrs. Mason said after a moment's thought, "was a confidential matter between the patient and her nurse. I don't think Miss Chandler would want me to talk about it. All I can tell you is that it was in payment for services I gave her. I think she overpaid me, several times at least; but she fixed the amounts herself."

"I haven't the least doubt that you earned the money. I've already admitted that. But really, Mrs. Mason, I think you ought to tell me what those services were."

He was sorry to add to the growing fear in those young eyes, but he proceeded steadily: "You know, all those canceled checks made out to 'Cash' and endorsed by you look a little odd. As Miss Chandler's confidential man of business, I'm justified in asking you to explain them."

"Oh, well, if you put it that way, I will. I've nothing to conceal."

"Good."

The visitor drew a quick breath.

"It was all through Miss Webb," she said abruptly. "I don't suppose you know it, and perhaps you won't even believe it, but Miss Webb was devoted to Miss Chandler."

"I believe it."

The admission encouraged the raconteuse. "She didn't like Miss Chandler at all at first, but she began to be very fond of her after she'd been with her a month or two. A nurse feels that way about a patient sometimes, especially a patient that's as helpless and hopeless and physically dependent as Miss Chandler was. And Miss Chandler had some wonderful qualities. Some dreadful ones, too, of course. But I liked her very much, myself, especially toward the end, so I could understand."

"Yes. Go on, please."

"Well, after a few months Miss Webb was fairly obsessed by her. It was like a school-girl 'crush' on an older teacher, and it was amazing because one wouldn't expect that sort of thing from Miss Webb. She told

me she had never met such a mind as Miss Chandler's, or such a wonderful talker as Miss Chandler was. You know Miss Chandler really could fascinate any one if she set out to, but I guess she didn't often take the trouble.

"At first, when she saw how much Miss Webb cared, it amused her. I could see her grin, in the evenings—that awful, impish grin of hers!—when Miss Webb was hanging around after I came on, and hating to leave her. But I guess it flattered Miss Chandler a little, too. Anyway, she grew gentler. She used to talk to Miss Webb in the mornings, when she felt her best, while Miss Webb was bathing her and rubbing her with alcohol and getting her ready for the day.

"Miss Chandler had traveled over the world and she'd had wonderful experiences and adventures. She could make one see them all. Even the little she talked to me at night showed me that. She used to make Miss Webb's eyes stick out and her head swim; and when she saw that, she talked more than ever. Miss Webb would be so full of it that she couldn't speak of anything but Miss Chandler when she and I were together. That wasn't often, of course—"

"Yes," the lawyer said again, and the quality of his tone brought the caller back to her point.

"The fonder Miss Webb got, the more exacting she got," she went on, more quickly. "She set herself to lengthen Miss Chandler's life. She felt that was the one thing she could do for her. She said there was

no reason why Miss Chandler shouldn't live for several years, because she had such courage and vitality. She wanted Miss Chandler to save her strength, and she began to try to keep out visitors. That irritated Miss Chandler and got dreadfully on her nerves. They had a lot of set-tos about it—"

"You mean quarrels?"

"Well, words, anyway. Miss Chandler said she didn't care a damn how long she lived, but she was going to do as she pleased while she did live; and she said she wouldn't be dictated to by any trained nurse or any one else. Miss Webb went to Doctor Cary, but he couldn't do anything. He didn't even try. Miss Chandler kept right on doing anything she wanted to do. She had started a lot of new things and she was busier than ever.

"One day she actually had herself taken to a phonograph studio and had some records made—dictated them, you know. She must have had a good many made, for she was there all afternoon. Of course she had to be carried on a stretcher and taken back and forth in a private ambulance, and the whole thing almost knocked her out. Miss Webb was with her, and Doctor Cary, but they had to wait in the outer studio and she only let them come into the laboratory, or whatever they call it, when she needed to be stimulated. They didn't hear anything she said or know what it was all about, and Miss Webb was frantic because she was burning up her vitality that way.

"Then the man White, who was supposed to be a

broker, brought the finished records and he tried them all out on Miss Chandler's new phonograph. They put in a lot of time doing that and it tired Miss Chandler terribly. I forgot to say that, before she went, Miss Chandler wrote for hours every day. She must have written out all the things she dictated. You can see how she was using up her strength. Miss Webb was half crazy with worry and anxiety about her, and she fussed every time she thought any one stayed too long. At last, one night when I came on, they were having a downright row about it."

"That's interesting," Long said thoughtfully.

"Miss Webb gave notice, and Miss Chandler ordered her to leave the house that very night. Then Miss Webb went off to pack, but of course she didn't do it. While Miss Webb was in her own room Miss Chandler talked to me more frankly than she had ever done before, and asked me to help her. She said she was making some experiments, and that she simply had to see certain people and to see them often. She said the experiments were vital and that they concerned her family, and that it was much more important to carry them out than to live a little longer. She said she hadn't the strength to do what she was doing and at the same time to argue with Miss Webb about it, and that she couldn't let Miss Webb go because she really liked her and had grown dependent on her.

"She was a quick thinker and she made her plans while she talked to me. She said that hereafter she'd have the men come in the evenings, after Miss Webb

went off duty. Miss Webb had got into the way of running in and out of the sick-room after I came on at night, but Miss Chandler said she'd stop that by getting tickets for her for theaters and concerts.

"It all worked out the way Miss Chandler planned. When Miss Webb was safely out of the house Miss Chandler would have her callers. They wouldn't come till eight, and of course they'd be gone before Miss Webb got back, around midnight. And they'd only come in the afternoons about once a week.

"Miss Webb was happy after that," the speaker added with a sigh. "She thought she had won out. Miss Chandler always got two tickets, so Miss Webb could take a friend with her, and she sent her back and forth to town in the sedan, just as she always sent me in it in the afternoons. Between us we kept Dunn busy. I bought the tickets ahead, when I was doing other errands in town, and that's the way a lot of those smaller checks went. But I wasn't happy about it, myself," the speaker ended with a sigh. "I mean about Mr. White and Mr. Jackson coming so often. By the way," she interpolated, "I think Mr. Jackson was a detective and that Miss Chandler was having some one sleuthed. Anyway, he looked and acted like one."

"Yes, go on."

"I wasn't happy," Mrs. Mason repeated somberly. "I knew all those night conferences weren't good for Miss Chandler, and that's where my responsibility came in. At the same time, it certainly wasn't good for her to be crossed and to be rowing with Miss Webb all

the time. We all knew she couldn't live long, anyway—not as long as Miss Webb thought she could. I talked to my fiancé about it; he's a doctor, you know. He said if it was his mother, he'd let her do anything she wanted to do, since it was a hopeless case, and entirely aside from any question of money. He said that when a woman is in the state Miss Chandler was in, about all one can do for her is to let her die happy. And Miss Chandler made the same point herself, again and again."

"So that's why you got the two hundred dollars and the other large checks?"

"That's why I got them. And that's why she left me the five hundred, too, I guess."

"Johnson must have been in on this," Long suddenly suggested.

"Of course he was. He had to be. But he didn't dream how much of it was going on. He was off several evenings a week himself, from eight on, and Nora answered the bell, or I did. You remember, don't you," she added conversationally, "the evening you yourself came to see Miss Chandler. That was just five nights before she died, I remember, and I opened the door for you. I'm sure no one in the house except Miss Chandler and me knew you were there that night."

She stopped and stared at the lawyer, who looked back at her vacantly.

"You remember that, don't you?" she repeated, struck by his expression. "You gave her a sleeping

powder that night. She told me you had. Surely you remember that?"

"Yes," said the lawyer, "I remember it." He asked his next question in a voice that made her give him another quick glance: "Did any other visitor come those evenings except Jackson and White?"

She hesitated a moment as if reflecting.

"Only one," she said at last. "He came twice."

"Who was he?"

"He was supposed to be from Mr. White's office. Perhaps he brought some more phonograph records, though I didn't hear them being tried as I did when Mr. White came. I always sat in Miss Webb's room when a visitor was with Miss Chandler. That's on the other side of the bathroom, you know. I could never make out any words, even when the phonograph was going. I could just hear Miss Chandler's voice, but I suppose they used the moderator.

"You asked if odd things happened. Several times I heard Miss Chandler herself speaking more loudly than usual, and for a long time, without interruption, like a person reciting something. That was one of the odd things. Miss Chandler made a mystery of a lot of things toward the last. I think she enjoyed doing that. It satisfied her dramatic instinct, if you know what I mean. And she simply loved making mysteries that puzzled Miss Webb. She knew Miss Webb was interested in everything about her, and she took a sort of . . . of . . ."

"Of sardonic delight," Long suggested.

"Yes, of sardonic delight—" the visitor accepted the verbal lift with eager gratitude—"in keeping Miss Webb in the dark as much as she could. I knew a whole lot more about her than Miss Webb knew."

"You certainly did," Long confirmed and smiled wanly at the memory of Miss Webb's description of the little creature before him. Apparently the love-obsessed Miss Connolly had fooled the calm, poised super-nurse to the top of her bent. The lawyer got out of his chair rather stiffly. "It's good of you to be so frank," he said. "You have helped me. Thank you."

She rose, too, and their eyes met in a sudden deep look.

"Then . . . you think what I did was all right?" she asked in a low voice.

"I won't go so far as that. But I suppose almost any one else might have done the same thing in your place."

He opened the office door for her, and even escorted her to the elevator. Mrs. Warren Mason smiled out at him as the car began to drop and then experienced a pang of compunction at sight of his face.

"He looks awfully old and tired," she told herself, and she added thoughtfully, "I'm glad I didn't tell him any more than I did!"

CHAPTER XI

A NIGHT VISIT

WHEN Nicholas Long entered the Chandler living-room that evening, dressed for dinner, it was empty save for Lily Price and the Troubadour, who were economically occupying one chair, as was their devoted habit. They were also clasped in a close embrace, from which they slowly and philosophically emerged at his appearance. The Troubadour bestirred himself to the extent of rising to shake hands, an attention Long could have dispensed with. But the young man proved himself the possessor of an understanding heart.

"Can't I mix you a high-ball, sir?" he sympathetically inquired. "You look awfully seedy, if you'll forgive my saying so."

"Your saying so doesn't exactly buck me up," the new-comer admitted. "But I won't have the high-ball, thank you."

"You might get one for Mother," Lily suggested. "She's going over the top to-night in Auntie's room, and, if I can judge by my experience last night, she'll need it."

Long looked at her curiously. "So you went last night?"

"I did. But for God's sake don't let's chat about it. Aunt C. C.'s sitting right there, you know," she flippantly added, indicating the empty Chinese chair with a casual wave of a hand, "and I don't think she'd like any synopsis I gave you."

That silenced him, and as Lily added nothing to it they regarded each other somewhat critically. Lily's position would not have found favor in conservative circles. She had slumped low into her chair after the Troubadour left, with the small of her back against one arm and both legs high over the other. The legs were very long and thin, and Lily's sheer flesh-colored silk stockings made them look quite bare. A cigarette hung at the extreme left corner of the girl's brilliantly painted mouth, and the somber eyes that stared at him above it held a look he sometimes saw in her mother's eyes. The observer told himself that Lily was the least attractive member of his new family. He wondered why the Troubadour loved her. Bryce seemed so wholesome, and there was something about Lily, despite her youth and fair, arrogant prettiness, that suggested degeneration and decay.

Mrs. Price entered the room with the little flutter and the effect of gaiety that had deceived Long the first night. It did not deceive him now. She made no comment on his blighted appearance, as the Troubadour had done, but Catherine Price referred to it promptly and with her usual candor when she came in two minutes later, heading a small procession made up of George and Ethel Dixon, Naomi and Bryce, whose

song had cheered them on their short journey. Henry Hutchins, it appeared, was dining out, an announcement that temporarily raised the spirits of a somewhat gloomy company.

"Hello, Uncle Nicholas," Catherine said. "You look like an impressionistic sketch of the wrath of God."

"And I feel like it," Long admitted. "I was up till three this morning."

"Naughty, naughty!" the Troubadour sang, and abruptly set down the tray he carried, to hurry across the room and kiss Lily.

"Darling," he anxiously inquired, "have I mentioned lately that I adore you?"

"Not for ten minutes," said Lily; and added absently, "Forgetful beast!"

"Mr. Long is never naughty," Ethel said, ignoring the pair, as usual. "If he ever was, he'd have some sympathy for the rest of us who are naughty all the time."

"Always the optimist, Sis," George muttered. "The grimmest reality of life is that one simply *can't* be bad all the time."

"A statement you superbly disprove even while you make it, old dear," said the Troubadour. "Lily, if you will hide the little curl back of your ear, which is driving me mad, I'll serve the high-ball to your mother."

"Give him the curl, Lil," Catherine absently advised. "He won't be happy till he gets it." Her eyes were on her mother, and Long was struck by the look in them. Evidently she discovered that he was watching her, for

she turned and smiled at him. It was a likable smile. Yes, Catherine was the best of the lot. Mrs. Price, still gay and fluttery, thirstily drank the high-ball the Troubadour gave her.

Miss Webb did not come to the living-room; but when the group filed in to dinner, Bryce among them with an accustomed air, she was already in the dining-room, giving the table a final inspection. She greeted them unsmilingly and dropped into her place, watching with somber eyes the bow of greeting each member of the group gave the empty chair at the head of the table.

"I like that," the Troubadour murmured as he inclined his fluffy yellow head. "A pretty ceremony, I call it. Shows a nice sentiment, too, if you ask me."

"But we don't," George growled, and the Troubadour sighed and kissed the top of Lily's shining head as he seated her.

"Uncle Nicholas," Catherine said in her high, clear voice, "open your heart to us and tell us why you look so much like a boiled owl to-night."

"He doesn't want to be confidential just now, while he's swallowing a live oyster the size of a tomato," Ethel suggested.

"It isn't alive," George muttered. "That oyster exhaled its last sigh and cast its last reproachful look up into his eyes at the instant he speared it with his fork."

"I'd be amazed by such ignorance if any one but George was speaking," the Troubadour observed.

"That oyster died when the fishman opened its shell and laid it on its little stomach in half the space it's accustomed to occupy. It couldn't stand having its style cramped like that, and I know exactly how it felt."

The intellectual discussion that followed filled ten minutes, to the relief of Long, who had no intention of telling the assembly why he looked like a boiled owl. He was even able to smile wanly over Lily's description of an oyster climbing out of boiling water and over the sides of the kettle it was being cooked in.

"My darling, you're confusing it with a lobster," the Troubadour cried. "How simply adorable of you!" He wiped his lips with his napkin and kissed her tenderly behind the left ear. "My favorite spot," he affably remarked to Miss Webb, who was observing him somewhat critically. "Though there's much to be said in favor of the nape of her neck and the little hollow just above the breast-bone—"

"Dick, for God's sake shut up," George groaned; and Mrs. Price said, "Children!" As usual, Mrs. Price was eating nothing, but her eyes were bright and she chatted animatedly to Naomi, who sat beside her. Long paid little attention to any of them. He was very tired, and he left the dining-room immediately after dinner, with a murmured remark about making up some sleep.

But when he reached his own room he showed himself in no hurry for bed. Instead, he put on a dressing-gown, drew his most comfortable chair close to the fire, and for a long time sat looking thoughtfully into the heart of the flames. Once he rose and paced the

floor. When he finally went back to the chair, he took up a book and tried to read. But he could not keep his eyes on the page. They slipped from it to the burning logs, to the rug at his feet, to space. At last he gave up the effort and dropped the book. The clock on his mantel struck ten; a nuisance, that clock. He hated hearing the hours tolled off at night, if he happened to be awake. And lately, for some reason, he usually happened to be awake.

He heard another sound, a quick tap at his door. He frowned. Young George, perhaps; and he was certainly in no mood to talk to young George to-night. But it wasn't George. The door opened as he hesitated and Catherine Price spoke from the threshold.

"I'm so glad you're up," she said hurriedly. "You see, Mother and Lil have sneaked off, and the Troubadour and I don't quite know what to do about it."

"Sneaked off? You mean they've left the house?"

"Yes."

Long's eyes narrowed. "What of it? They've got plenty of time to get back before midnight."

"They won't get back," Catherine dully assured him. "Mother doesn't want to make that pilgrimage to Aunt C. C.'s room."

"Then they'll go to a hotel or to your mother's apartment. Don't make a tragedy of it," he added almost impatiently as she held her ground and looked at him. "It will be their first offense. They'll still have two nights of grace, you know."

"Only one," Catherine confessed. "You see . . . they were out last night! I didn't know it till morning. Lil and I had a row and I slept in Naomi's room."

"So . . . they were out last night!" He looked at her. The girl was taking this hard. "Even at that, they'll still have a night to the good," he reminded her.

Catherine did not move. "They'll use it to-morrow night. Oh, don't stare so!" Her features, rigidly held in control, now twisted and seemed to run together. She bit her lips to check their quiver. "It's all so damned hopeless!" she cried and at last turned as if to leave him.

Long, though he had risen at her entrance, had not moved toward her. Now he crossed the room and called her. She came back to the threshold.

"Where are they?" he asked gently. "Do you know?"

"I'll tell the world I know! At least I know it's got to be one of two places."

"Do you want me to go after them?"

"Could you? *Would* you?" For a moment hope looked at him out of her eyes, then disappeared. "Oh, what's the use? They'll merely go again to-morrow night," she muttered.

"To-morrow is to-morrow," Long said. "Let's do what we can to-night and let to-morrow take care of itself. If you'll wait here in the hall, I'll be with you in two minutes."

He hurried back into his room. When he emerged,

dressed to go out, he found the Troubadour waiting with Catherine in the hall, and he was struck by the youth's expression.

"Is there any reason why we should make a secret of this expedition?" he asked Catherine.

"I'd rather Miss Webb didn't know about it."

"Where are we going?—to town?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll order the car and have Dunn drive us. If you and Bryce will slip out to the front gate and wait, I'll go to the garage and stir up Dunn."

"Let me do that, sir!" The Troubadour, who obviously had his uses, was off as he spoke.

Catherine, having stopped in her room for an evening coat on the way downstairs, threw it over her shoulders as she accompanied Long out of the house. In silence they hurried along the driveway toward the entrance to the grounds. When they got there, Long spoke:

"It's drugs, I suppose."

"Yes. That's plain enough. I wondered when you'd catch on. But Mother could fool almost any one, till just lately."

"How long have they been using drugs?"

"Mother's been at it eight or nine years, off and on. But now it's mostly on and very little off. It's only a matter of a year or two with Lily." Her voice broke. "Lil was trying to help Mother—followed her to some of the places, and they got her into it, too. And Mother let them!" The girl's voice broke hysterically.

"Mother *let* them," she repeated. "Turn your gray matter on that for a minute!"

Long turned it and turned it away again. "Where shall we find them?"

"We may have to go to two places. But I think they'll be at home."

"At home?"

"I mean at our old apartment. Dick says that Mother has just sublet it to one of the women—" She broke off. "I think they'll be there," she repeated. "Anyway, we'll go there first. We won't have any trouble getting in, either, for the clerk will let us go up and I have a latch-key to the flat. I had to drag you into this because Dick and I can't do anything with them if they've got past a certain point. Perhaps you can't, either. But it's worth trying."

The car, driven by Dunn and with young Bryce elegantly reclining among the cushions of the rear seat, came speeding along the driveway and picked them up. The Troubadour made room for them in silence. As they drove to town Catherine continued her conversation with Long as if there had been no intermission. Her nervousness, like George's, was of the sort that calls for the relief of words. The Troubadour's was different. He sat in a black silence, listening to the sleet that bit icily at the sedan's windows. Long was struck by the look of utter misery on his round young face.

"Mother admires you, really," Catherine said. "That's why you may have some influence. I thought of Miss

Webb first. She'd help if she could; she's a pretty good sport, when all's said and done. I'm getting fond of her. But she'd be worse than useless in this case. Mother loathes her."

"Why?"

"Because Miss Webb has been on to Mother for months. Aunt C. C. learned about it, too, a few weeks before she died, so Mother thinks Miss Webb told her. I don't agree. I think Aunt C. C. found it out some other way. Mother accused Miss Webb of it, the day after we came here, and the pair of them had a big row. I guess you got the aftermath of it. All the rest of us did."

"Miss Webb ought to be more patient with such an affliction," Long muttered. "A trained nurse should understand."

"She understands too damned well. That's the trouble," Catherine explained. "She tried to help Mother at first. But patients in Mother's state do terrible things. They lie, they steal, they break promises as if they were crackers. They're full of schemes and tricks. They have absolutely no moral sense. They do things they'd die rather than do if they were themselves. Why, only yesterday, even Lily—"

"Cath, for God's sake, *don't!*" The Troubadour spoke hoarsely and shivered farther back into his corner, and Catherine, after a quick glance at him, went on in a different tone:

"Miss Webb has seen Mother do them all, and I guess she's fed up with them. The thing she can't

seem to forgive is Mother's letting Lil get into it, and I must say I feel the same way about that. So does Dick."

"Cath, stop talking for just a minute!" the Troubadour begged in agony.

"Of course you realize that you'll have to send your mother to a sanatorium for treatment if it's as bad as that," Long suggested.

Catherine sighed. "I know. She's had half a dozen 'cures,' and they help for a while. But we haven't a cent for anything like that now. I expected to send both Mother and Lil as soon as we got our money. I simply can't do it till then."

The Troubadour interrupted violently:

"We won't send Lil to any sanatorium! I'll take care of her, myself, day and night. I've done it before and I can do it again. And if she's away from her mother's influence, I can cure her."

"Perhaps you can, Dickie," Catherine said gently. "Anyway, we'll try it. You're the doctor, so far as Lil's concerned." She caught Long's look of surprise, and explained. "He's her husband, you know," she said. "He married her last year, to try to save her, when we saw this thing was getting a hold on her. That's why he's been around so much. He's been her shadow. I don't know what I'd have done without him. He hasn't let her get out of hand very often—only three times before last night. But it's been terribly hard. We've had poor Mother against us every minute."

Her thoughts veered.

"All this is pretty hard on you," she said. "If Aunt C. C. had left us where we were, we could have kept our skeletons decently covered a little longer. But she's dragged us and our skeletons here, and their bones are rattling in your poor ears every minute. I know now that's the way she wanted it," she added heavily. "That's what I meant when I said at the breakfast table that she was trying to help us. She wants the whole hellish business out in the family open, so we can get together and pull one another through. Don't you think that's it?"

"I'm sure that's it," Long quietly agreed.

The car stopped at the entrance of the Wellington Arms. The big apartment-house, which had a reputation for quiet and exclusiveness, was already almost dark. Night lights burned at the entrance and in the empty lobby, but most of the windows were unlighted.

"Park right near here and wait for us," Long told Dunn as they left the car.

"We'll have to compose our features and seem in good spirits," Catherine said as they passed through the swinging storm-doors. "Wake up and carol, Dickie."

The Troubadour smiled and his round white face was like a tragic clown's. He preceded them across the vestibule, to ring the elevator bell, and Catherine glanced after him with a softened look.

"He's more of a lad than you'd think," she told

Long, and the lawyer replied, "I'm beginning to realize that."

"But he's almost off his head, poor boy, or he'd know we mustn't rush upstairs till we're sure Mother's there. Go and keep him from ringing for the elevator, till I find out. And tell him to pull himself together," Catherine directed. "He'll make the innocent bystander wonder what's wrong."

There was indeed one innocent bystander in the lobby, a sallow youth who had just come out of a telephone booth and in the better light of the hall was looking up a number in a directory he held in his hand. He blinked over a page near-sightedly, and followed a column of names with an eager forefinger. Long hurried after the Troubadour, and Catherine crossed to the night-clerk, who was at his desk behind a railed inclosure, looking over a pile of late mail. He smiled as he glanced up and recognized her.

"I'm meeting my mother and sister here, George," she casually announced. "Have they come yet?"

"Yes, Miss Price, they got here half an hour ago."

"Then I'll go right up. Is the world treating you well?"

"I'll say it is." He smiled at her again, but his eyes were serious. He fingered the letters he was holding and spoke with quick decision as she turned away:

"Beg pardon, Miss Price, but if you've a minute to spare . . ." As she faced him he added quickly, but in a low voice, "I'd like to ask you a few questions about Madame Dalmier."

"Madame Dalmier? Who's she?"

"Why—" the clerk stared—"the lady your mother sublet the apartment to."

"Oh, yes," Catherine said slowly.

"She's just over from Paris, your mother told me," the young man went on, "and I understood that she was a friend of your family."

Catherine shrugged her thin shoulders and rested an elbow on the desk between them.

"Perhaps she is, but I don't seem to remember much about her. When did she move in?"

"The day after you left."

"Didn't you get references when Mother sublet to her?"

"No, I didn't; and that's just the trouble." He spoke volubly now but in the same low tone, and his manner showed that he was deeply disturbed. "You see, when your mother sublet the apartment, she was still responsible for the rent until the first of May, so we didn't go as carefully into Madame Dalmier's references as we usually do. All we had to know was that she was financially responsible and a woman of good social standing, and your mother said she was both."

"Well, doesn't that settle it?" Catherine's look sharpened and she turned her face toward Long and the Troubadour, uneasily waiting near the elevator.

"It ought to," George slowly agreed. "Naturally, we thought it did. But now I'm beginning to wonder if Mrs. Price really knows much about Madame Dal-

mier. Perhaps she was taking her a good deal on trust, as we've done."

"I don't remember the woman." Miss Price had turned toward him again. "But what makes you wonder?"

"Well—" the young man hesitated—"principally the sort of people who come to see her," he brought out with a rush. "She's only been here a few days, you know, but she's had visitors every afternoon and evening. And they're . . . I don't quite know how to put it; but they're different from the others that come to this building."

"How do you mean—different? Are they noisy? . . . vulgar?"

The girl spoke so sharply that George looked at her in surprise.

"No," he hastily admitted. "Not at all. In fact, quite the contrary. But . . ." He hesitated again.

"Tell me all that's on your mind, George," Catherine invited, and he responded with another rush of words.

"You know we've got a very exclusive clientele here," he began (he pronounced it "kline-tell"), "and we're proud of it. Our tenants are sort of elegant and refined, and the folks that come to see them are the same kind. No drinking crowd. No loud parties. Not much entertaining, anyway. Madame Dalmier has a lot of callers."

"Well, what of that? You're bound to get some people in here occasionally that are live ones!"

The clerk waved a deprecating hand. "I guess you know what I mean, all right. We don't object to a little life. Personally, I'd like to have more of it around here. I was glad when you and your sister and your friends were running in and out at all hours. But Madame Dalmier's callers aren't the live sort.

"She hasn't had a man visitor since she came," he went on slowly. "They're all women, and sometimes six or eight of them walk in and out during the afternoon or evening. I'd think it was just a question of little teas and bridge parties if they were ordinary-looking visitors. But they're different. It's usually the same bunch coming and going, alone or in pairs. Some are well dressed and others look as if they'd been blown in by a storm.

"One of them looks almost like a tramp. But maybe she's just a Bohemian of the Greenwich Village type. I lived in New York a year and I've seen 'em! She's the worst of the lot that calls on Madame Dalmier. Her hair's always half down, and her hat's crooked, and her clothes—well, I relieved Burke, the day-man, yesterday, and I saw her come in at five in the afternoon, with one gray suède slipper on and one black patent-leather pump. I saw that, myself! Her hands were dirty, and she had rings on them that must have cost a fortune.

"There's another woman that's young and pretty and well dressed, and scared to death. She keeps her collar around her face and sneaks in and out as if she

felt afraid to be seen here. It's the way they act that puzzles me, Miss Price!"

"How do they act?"

"Well, for one thing, they're all nervous, as far as that goes. We have to telephone their names to Madame Dalmier the first time they come. After that we can let 'em up, once we know they're her 'friends,' he quoted ironically. "When they're waiting at the desk some of them are so nervous they can't stand still. One of them acts as if she had St. Vitus's dance."

"Oh, come now!" Catherine said; but she had grown very pale.

The clerk, absorbed in the relief of his unbosoming, did not observe her change of color. His low voice hurried on:

"I know how bad some rich folks dress and how nervous most women are nowadays, and how many women are drinking too much. But there's something queer about this bunch. If only one or two of them were unusual, I wouldn't give it a second thought. But when they're all so odd—"

"All? Every one?"

"Oh, I suppose that's saying too much. There's one very dignified dark woman who's a perfect lady; and there's a young girl that's pretty and pleasant. I was awful glad to see your mother and sister show up last night and again to-night. Silly as it sounds, I had begun to be afraid that woman was selling something up there. I thought maybe she was having some little

cocktail and high-ball parties, and making her callers pay through the nose for them. Though, come to think of it," he added reflectively, "they usually act more natural when they're leaving than when they come. That's queer, too, isn't it?"

The Troubadour hurried across the lobby and caught Catherine's arm.

"For Heaven's sake, Cath, come on! It's getting late," he jerked out almost furiously. "Mr. Long says we've got to hurry."

At the look she gave him he turned away and went back to the lawyer. The clerk nodded.

"That's the way they act," he said almost triumphantly, as if pleased by this apt illustration of his text. "Nervous, high-strung, if you know what I mean. They're usually like that when they come at night. But he's the first man—he's with you, though, isn't he?" he added blankly. Then, as if the discovery had frightened him, he brought out with considerable firmness: "I believe this woman has a little 'speak-easy' up there, and of course your mother doesn't suspect it. Whatever it is, we've got to get rid of Madame Dalmier. We can't have queer things going on here."

"You may be all wrong. Has any one else noticed anything unusual about her visitors?"

"This is a mighty quiet house, you know. There aren't many people coming and going. Only the other night-clerk seems to have noticed anything so far. Of course we see the worst of it at night. And, yes, one of the day-men spoke of two women that came to see

Madame Dalmier—tousled and messy creatures with dirty finger-nails and wonderful fur coats. They're a weird lot; and I don't mean maybe!" he ended with emphasis.

"They may be friends of Madame Dalmier who go in for crystal-gazing or table-rapping or for holding séances. There's a lot of that sort of thing in society now. And you know how eccentric those people usually are."

"That's right, too." His face had brightened. "I don't want to start anything unless I have to," he admitted. "It'll get me into trouble if I do; but I may get into worse trouble if I don't. You see, I was the one that passed in Madame Dalmier on Mrs. Price's say-so."

"Lie low for a day or two, anyway," Catherine advised. "I'll look into this."

He nodded, reassured; then looked troubled again.

"There's one of them now," he whispered.

Catherine's eyes took the direction of his glance. Then she nodded to the clerk and strolled toward the elevator, close on the footsteps of the new-comer, who was hurrying across the lobby. The car was waiting and she followed the other woman into it, drawing Long and the Troubadour after her by an eye-flash and nodding affably to the operator. The lad at the lever seemed overcome with pleasure at the reappearance of Miss Price, but Catherine, usually friendly in all human encounters, for once ignored him. Her gaze was on the woman she had followed.

The stranger, though she had entered the elevator first, was at the front of the car, almost pressing against its door in her haste to be out again. She must be, the observer decided, the woman George had described as "young and well dressed and pretty, and scared to death." She wore a small cloche hat, and a fur coat whose collar covered most of her face, and she carried an elaborate gold-mesh hand-bag. The girl would hardly have observed her at all but for the clerk's words. Now, watching her, she saw that the hand holding the bag shook with nervousness and that the woman's incessantly moving eyes were at once wild and furtive. The stranger left the car at the third floor, but Catherine, with a slight gesture, kept Long and Bryce in it till they reached the fourth. Then she turned a look of reproach on the operator.

"Oh, Johnny, we've gone past! I was thinking. Third, of course."

"I *thought* it was funny you didn't get off at the third, Miss Price," Johnny expansively observed as he reversed the clutch.

The stranger was out of sight when they left the car at the third floor. Catherine led her companions to the door of the Price apartment and then past it.

"I've got something to tell you," she said. "Something pretty serious. Let's go around the corner."

They entered a side corridor and she gave them a quick summary of the clerk's revelation.

"That settles any one's going in with me," she said. "I couldn't have taken Dick in, anyway. It would have

made Mother too furious. I thought I might risk Uncle Nicholas, but now it isn't safe. I've got to play a lone hand. I'll use my key and slip in very quietly. Be close to the door, outside. I'll want to feel that you're right there."

She left them, and Long and the Troubadour, each unwilling to meet the other's eyes, watched her in silence as she hurried away. After a moment or two they followed her and took their patient stand a few feet from the door before which she had stopped.

CHAPTER XII

MADAME DALMIER

CATHERINE'S hand trembled as she inserted her latch-key into the keyhole. This was something she had not prepared for. To face her mother and sister alone, with Long in the immediate background, would have meant a painful scene; but at least in it she would have been dealing with forces she knew and understood. The unexpected presence of Madame Dalmier's "kline-tell" lent something indescribably sinister to the encounter. The woman was there by right of sublease. The apartment was hers. Catherine had no right to enter it unbidden, unannounced, as she was doing. Yet to attempt any other method meant that she would not be permitted to enter at all.

Even as she turned the key she planned her simple course of action. She would feign ignorance of Madame Dalmier's presence and possession. She would be surprised to find strangers there, then would assume that they were guests of her mother and sister. That would force the Dalmier woman to explain, and the person who is forced to explain is always at a disadvantage. The reflection gave the girl courage. She opened the door.

Two years earlier her mother had replaced with one shaded bulb the brilliant side lights in the small private hall. That was at the beginning of the period when Mrs. Price had shown an increasingly marked distaste for light. To-night the bulb was dimmer than ever, and Catherine was not surprised. But the door opening from the little hall into the apartment was ajar and past a heavy, pushed-back curtain she saw the familiar living-room, lost in vague shadows and at first glance apparently unoccupied. As she stared uncertainly into it, however, she realized that there was a dim illumination from an open fire which burned behind a screen, and that small points of heavily shaded light came from a few individual bulbs feebly asserting themselves in brackets on opposite walls, and that there was a slight rustle and stir in the room.

She also had an immediate impression that the room itself was greatly changed. There were new and heavy pieces of furniture in it—divans, half a dozen of them. The atmosphere was close and warm, and reeking with the scent of a heavy Eastern perfume. She stood motionless and staring, her eyes slowly becoming accustomed to the gloom. All but one of the divans were occupied by women stretched at full length upon them. The one nearest the door held the stranger who had been on the elevator with her.

She alone was sitting upright, and her tense attitude was in sharp contrast to the inertia of the other figures. She had thrown her hat and coat on the floor beside her, and Catherine saw quite plainly now her

fair, untidy hair and livid little face, its features twisting almost grotesquely. Her hands closely clasped her knees, and one foot was far forward as if about to spring. Her eyes were quiet at last. They clung with an unswerving stare to a closed door at the far end of the room.

For a moment the observer watched her with fascinated interest. Then Catherine's eyes, increasingly accustomed to the dusk, passed from one to the other of the figures on the divans. Which of them was her mother's? which Lily's? One divan held two figures—possibly theirs. She could not tell. All the figures looked alike. The women were not sleeping. An arm moved here; a body changed its position over there. From somewhere, several rooms away, the sound of music came very faintly. The music was good, a piano arrangement of De Falla's "Nights in the Gardens of Spain," played with a precision that suggested a mechanical instrument.

The far door now opened and a short, plump woman came through it. She was middle-aged, with dark hair streaked with gray, and a heavy-featured but intelligent face. She wore a look of impeccable respectability. Her type was British. She might have been the head of an English nursing home. She carried her weight like a banner and moved with extraordinary ease and lightness toward the woman sitting on the divan, who sprang up to meet her with a strangled gasp.

Simultaneously some warning sense impelled the

new-comer to glance toward the threshold. She saw Catherine and her eyes widened. She swung in the new direction, caught the girl's arm in a powerful grip, and, drawing her out into the hall, closed the door. There she released the arm and stood with her back to the door, facing the unexpected guest.

The maneuver was so sudden that Catherine had instinctively yielded to its force and authority. Now she stood speechless for an instant, rubbing the arm that still felt the imprints of five fingers.

"What are you doing here?" the woman asked in a low but incisive voice. "How did you get in?"

"With my latch-key. I'm Miss Price." Catherine spoke in a tone as low as the other's, but tried to make her voice sound casual.

"Oh, Miss Price." The woman's face changed, but she looked confused and doubtful.

"My mother and sister are here to-night, you know. Are you Madame Dalmier?"

"No. I'm called Kirby."

"Well, Kirby, I'd like to go in, if you'll be good enough to move away from the door."

The girl's voice and manner were natural now. She spoke with her usual flippancy and a little louder than before, taking a step toward the door as she ceased. But Kirby held her ground.

"Perhaps it's all right," she muttered, "but I must make sure. You'll have to see Madame Dalmier. I'll go and fetch her. Sit down and wait."

Catherine nodded indifferently and took the one chair the hall contained, a high-backed and severely uncomfortable one standing in a corner. It, too, was new. The door closed on Kirby and reopened in a surprisingly short time. It closed again, and Catherine, instinctively rising to her feet, was confronted in the dim hall by a new and striking figure.

It was tall and straight and slender, and dressed in immaculate white linen. The face, almost as white as the linen, was a superb but expressionless mask, and the woman's snow-white hair, soft and with a silver luster, was bobbed and waved with a perfection of line the visitor grasped in detail as the other turned her head for an instant to make sure the door was shut behind her. The head itself was carried like the head of an empress, and Catherine Price, beauty-loving pagan that she was, felt even in that moment the lure of the other's strange and sinister charm. For it was both strange and sinister.

She met Madame Dalmier's eyes—unforgettable eyes, almost expressionless, almost colorless, too, in the dim light. "She might be an Albino," Catherine told herself. "But she isn't. More likely she's one of those Russian white-blondes we hear about but don't often see."

"Mademoiselle," said a cold voice, in English much more perfect than the visitor's, "why did you force your way in here?"

"I didn't force my way in. I opened the door with my latch-key. You see," Catherine evaded, still half

hypnotized by her strange hostess, "my mother didn't tell me she had sublet the flat."

Madame Dalmier nodded slowly, as if accepting the explanation, but her eyes never left the girl's face. De Falla's music came to their ears faintly, as if from far away.

"Why did you come?" Madame Dalmier asked at last. "Is it that you wish to join them for a treatment?"

The suggestion, made in words that dropped like broken icicles, ended the temporary spell that had held the caller. Suddenly and terribly she saw that superb figure as it was, stripped of its hideous mockery of a nurse's uniform and standing before her the skeleton symbol of death.

"No," she said with so complete a change of tone and manner that the white eyebrows of Madame Dalmier rose a trifle, "I have not come to join them, madame. I've come to take them away."

The white head nodded again, but now there was something menacing in the nod, though the woman spoke calmly:

"You cannot do that, my young friend. Go home and wait till they return."

She put one hand on the knob of the door leading to the outer hall, and caught the girl's left shoulder in the other. Her hands looked colorless and delicate, but her grasp was as powerful as Kirby's. Catherine twisted out of it.

"Don't touch me," she said in a strangled voice,

"and don't open that door yet. There are two men on the other side of it, waiting for me."

The woman's hands fell, from the girl's shoulder, from the door-knob.

"S-o . . ." she said, drawing out the word. "It is trouble you want, then?"

"Not unless you choose to start it. But I think you're in for some, all right. The night-clerk stopped me when I came into the lobby, a few minutes ago, and told me he didn't like your visitors. But you needn't have any trouble just now," she added as the other's look changed, "if you will let me take my mother and sister away quietly."

"They won't go."

"You'll know how to make them. I fancy you've had a good deal of experience in these little emergencies. Come, hurry up!" Catherine spoke now as she had never spoken to an inferior, with complete and contemptuous authority. "One of the friends on the other side of that door is one of the most influential men in the city," she added. "He could have you out of here and in prison to-night."

For a long moment the two stared at each other in silence, while conflict rose between them like a pillar of fire. But the Russian, Catherine reflected as she watched her, had two commendable qualities, courage and self-control. Not even her strange eyes lost their steadiness.

"Come in," she said at last, and, turning without another word, she opened the door and led her com-

panion into the living-room that had once been so familiar. As Catherine had suggested, Madame Dalmier appeared to have had previous experience in such crises as this. Her manner showed no uncertainty of purpose. She walked straight to the divan that held the two figures—they *were* Lily and her mother, then, Catherine reflected with a choked breath—and caught a shoulder of each in those powerful hands of hers.

From the divan where the blonde stranger sat came low whines broken by inarticulate mutterings. Evidently the woman had dropped back to the edge of the divan after that ecstatic spring to her feet at sight of Kirby, but the preoccupation of Madame Dalmier had postponed the treatment she had come for. Now she was crouched forward, holding her knees. The sounds she made were animal-like.

"Who's doing that?" a voice asked from the far end of the room. It added languidly: "Don't talk. Don't make a noise."

The blonde woman paid no attention. She was past hope, past self-control, choking and whining.

The double grip of Madame Dalmier disturbed Mrs. Price and Lily, but only slightly. They opened their half-closed eyes, turned an indifferent look on her, and closed them again. Mrs. Price kept hers shut and turned her head away. But Lily blinked and stared, vacantly at first, then with dawning consciousness, at Madame Dalmier's companion.

"Mother," she muttered uncertainly, "look who's here. There's Catherine." She smiled. "H'lo, Cath."

"Don't talk," said a low, drawling voice from a near-by divan. Other figures began to move and stir, vaguely disturbed by a sense of unaccustomed happenings.

"Get up," Madame Dalmier ordered. She spoke very softly but with a quality in her voice that, together with those impelling hands, slowly brought the two figures to a sitting posture. Kirby hurried to the side of her mistress, seized the feet of mother and daughter, and placed them on the floor. With a leverage as efficient and as coördinated as if applied by one person, maid and mistress raised their two "guests" and swiftly propelled them to the door and through it into the hall.

"I'll take care of them now," Kirby jerked out to her mistress. "Better look after Mrs. Baird. She's at the jump-off. She'll have them all stirred up in a few minutes more."

Through the still open door she looked back at "Mrs. Baird" as she spoke, and Catherine's eyes instinctively followed hers. The blonde woman was off the divan now, down on the floor, clutching, clawing, tearing at her clothing. Catherine's breath caught and a sickening nausea swept over her. She saw the door close when Madame Dalmier had passed through it, and almost simultaneously the whining stopped. Kirby opened the outer door and with a sudden fierce shove thrust Mrs. Price and Lily across the threshold and into the main hall of the building.

"Take them," she hissed as Catherine caught her

mother to keep her from falling. The door closed and a bolt shot home.

From the shadows Long and the Troubadour hastened forward. Mrs. Price shook off Catherine's arms and stared at them incredulously with her faded eyes, which now showed a faint sparkle.

"But . . . what's . . . the . . . idea?" she asked in a vague, gentle voice, spacing her words as if feeling for them one by one.

"Catherine wants us to go home, Mother, and Mr. Long and Dick have come for us." Lily's voice sounded almost natural now. "I guess they're worried about Aunt C. C.'s curfew rule."

"Oh, is . . . that . . . it?" Mrs. Price was still under the sodden ecstasy that had held her. She took the arm Long silently offered and tried to smile at him. The smile was horrible. He turned his face away from her.

"H'lo, Dick," said Lily.

"Hello, Lil."

He put an arm around her and led her to the elevator. There, before the car appeared, she shook him off.

"Don't paw me," she said irritably. "You ought to know by this time that I hate to be touched."

They made the elevator descent and the little journey across the empty vestibule, and George nodded at them affably from the desk. Catherine and the Troubadour returned his nod and chatted cheerfully as the party went out through the swinging winter

doors. George whistled unconcernedly under his breath as he dropped a few letters into their pigeonholes. It was a relief to him to have people like the Prices call on Madame Dalmier, after that other bunch. Not but what Mrs. Price herself had been a little queer at times, during the last year or so. But, then, every one was queer. Sometimes he felt queer himself. George grinned, looked over a telegram that had just come in, and decided that the "party" it was addressed to could wait for it till morning. No use waking people up at night. . . .

In the Chandler hall, an hour later, Catherine, who was leaving her mother's room, stopped to speak to Long.

"Oh, why did you wait?" she asked with genuine compunction. "I know how awfully tired you are to-night. Yes, I suppose they're all right now," she added in answer to his question. "At least they're in their beds. I'm going to Naomi's room to ask her to take me in for the rest of the night. I can't . . ."

"Of course not." Long looked at her. "What next, Catherine?"

"I've thought it all out. I ought to send Mother to a 'cure' to-morrow. To-night's experience shows that. God knows where I'll get the money."

"I know, too, Catherine. Don't worry about the money."

"You mean . . . ?" Her breath caught.

"Yes, I'll advance it."

"Dick is sure he can pull Lil through, and I guess he can." She repeated her earlier tribute: "He's quite a lad." She drew a deep, shaking breath. "But it will be a good deal like sending Mother to the electric chair; only there'll be nothing quick and merciful about it," she went on. "The doctors warned me after the last 'cure' that they didn't think she could stand another. It's just straight hell for her, you know."

"I know, my dear. But it seems to be hell for your mother any way we look at it. And we've got to save Lily, haven't we?"

"Yes, we've got to save Lil." She met his eyes and again compunction seized her. "Do go to bed, Uncle Nicholas," she said hastily. "I'll try to thank you tomorrow. To-night you look half dead."

He smiled down into the little painted face, which suddenly looked sweet and girlish under its tangerine overlay.

"I am half dead, Catherine, and I almost wish that I was altogether dead," he added wearily. "Good night."

He went on upstairs, Catherine stood motionless, staring after him.

"I thought there was one rock in this hideous whirlpool of ours," she told Naomi half an hour later, as they lay side by side in the darkness. "But if Uncle Nicholas meant that—"

"He meant it, all right," Naomi said.

"You think he did?" Catherine was startled. For a blessed moment she forgot her own tragedy.

"I think he did. He's getting a lot of jolts. Almost any one of them might bowl him over, and he's getting them all at once. Just the same, I'd be glad to change places with him."

"So would I," Catherine groaned.

CHAPTER XIII

CARY'S SOBER SECOND THOUGHT

THE pace of the last fortnight had been a trifle too swift for a man whose normal way of life was deliberate and easeful. Long wearily admitted this to Miss Webb at tea-time the next day, after Mrs. Price had been left at the sanatorium. It had been a tragic episode; a matter of ostensibly taking her for a country drive, to end with tea at the home of a suburban friend, and in reality of leaving her in virtual imprisonment . . . of seeing the complete moral and physical collapse of a once proud and high-minded woman . . . of hearing her shrieks . . . of keeping Lily out of the way, too, till it was over. But the Troubadour had attended to that end of the affair; a suddenly silent, songless Troubadour, whose round, unwinking blue eyes held misery.

When they reached home Catherine had gone directly to her room, with a request to be let alone. Lily and the Troubadour were still testing the speed limit of Long's roadster, and Long had gone into the living-room and found Miss Webb there and demanded tea. Somehow, it was not a day for other stimulants. Miss Webb gave him the tea, looking sympathetic and less splendidly sure of herself than usual, and even, he

fancied, slightly depressed. Her atmosphere was amazingly soothing. She knew, of course, that Mrs. Price had been taken away. She had known all along the truth about Mrs. Price's condition. She must know that Mrs. Price had slandered her. He wondered how much more she knew.

He drank his tea in silence and looked at her while he did so. She was amazingly worth looking at, but he was not thinking of her beauty. He had been afraid she would not be in when he got home. It had been a great relief to find her there. He didn't know why it had been, and was too depressed and tired to care. Now he had an unexpected desire to confide in her, to tell her about something that was harassing him. But he suddenly realized that one of its harassing features was that he could not tell her about it. He could not tell any one. He passed his hand across his forehead, with a deep sigh, and she hastened to refill his tea-cup.

"You're very tired, aren't you?" She was looking at him as if she were his mother, and her tone was that a mother uses to her small son. The boy in him responded to it.

"Yes," he told her; "and worried, too."

"Can I help?"

"You are helping." He drank the tea and with it swallowed the other words on his tongue. Of course he couldn't tell her.

Her brown eyes continued to dwell on him. He liked the look. There was nothing professional about her

this afternoon. She was wholly feminine and definitely comforting.

He selected a cigar from the box she offered him and sat holding it unlighted, staring blankly into the fire. She struck a match and held it for him, and the little service broke the black spell that for a moment had settled over him like a drifting fog. He leaned back in his chair, drew a deep mouthful of smoke, and exhaled it on another sigh.

"It's been a hard day," he admitted.

"I know. But Miss Chandler would have been glad of what you've done."

"I suppose she would." For a moment he smoked in silence. Then, "One wonders," he said, "why she didn't attend to some of these matters herself."

"Surely that's clear enough," his companion pointed out. "She discovered them only a few weeks before she died. By then she hadn't time or strength or nervous force to do much about them."

"Yet she gave time and strength and nervous force to a lot of experimenting and investigation—"

"All of which was right along the line of help. It cleared the ground for you."

A tired man asked the question that had been whirling in his mind for days:

"Then why didn't she tell me she had cleared the ground and let me start intelligently, instead of pitching me into this mess blindfolded?"

"I can answer that, too," Miss Webb said very gently. "So could you if you were not so exhausted.

She was a desperately sick woman and she was overwhelmed by her discoveries. She didn't know what to do about them. She didn't want the responsibility of action. Yet she was afraid to remain inactive. She was afraid of other things, too, as I've told you before. Most of all, she was afraid to die after the selfish life she lived; for I suppose there's no doubt that it was one of the most selfish lives a woman ever lived. I loved her, but I felt that she never did anything for anybody. Did she?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I think in the beginning it was partly the frantic impulse to divert her mind from her fate that made her put detectives on the trail of her heirs. Certainly it was as much that as the wish to help them. The things she found out made her realize that she had to do something, but she couldn't decide what. She had lost faith in her own judgment. Perhaps she hadn't entire faith in the detectives and didn't want to handicap you by a mass of information that might be partly inaccurate.

"She must have realized, too, that she had given her strength and nervous energy to the investigations. She was losing ground every day, though I got rid of as many of her visitors and as much of the writing as I could. She knew she hadn't time to carry out any plans of her own, even if she had been up to making them. She said to me again and again: 'I wish to God my brain was what it used to be. I can't think clearly any more.' So she turned the whole

problem over to you, without any strings of her own tied to it. I think she thought that was the only fair way to do it, and I believe you'll find that she has allowed you a lot of leeway. She had ceased to trust her own judgment, but she had utter faith in yours. I knew that by the way she always spoke of you."

"I'm beginning to feel as she did—that my brain isn't what it used to be."

"Your brain's all right." She was a nurse again and her tone was professional. "You'll pull up in a day or two."

Long looked at her as she sat there in her white uniform. She and the Troubadour, more than any other human beings he knew, radiated a personal neatness that was as fresh as a breeze from the sea. The question in the back of his mind leaped forward again. How much did she know? He made another effort to find out.

"Do you know," he asked quietly, "that Catherine Chandler actually tried to persuade some of her heirs to get poison for her?"

"What? No! You can't mean that!" Under the shock of his words his companion straightened and sat rigid. For a moment she continued to look at him incredulously across the tea-table. He remained silent and she slowly sank back into her chair.

"She did," he repeated at last.

This time he saw her take in the statement, consider it, and finally accept it.

"That was a horrible thing for her to do," she

brought out at last. "But of course she never meant it. She was merely trying them out. Probably it was one of her experiments."

"No doubt of it. But that's no excuse for her, and it raised the devil with the youngsters. We'll simply have to accept Miss Chandler's own defense: her mind wasn't as strong as it had been."

"Then—" she had been thinking it out and now her eyes widened—"it proves what I've said right along. It explains why she was afraid. She realized she had started something she might not be able to control. And she was right. In the end *she got it!* Some one gave it to her."

"Possibly."

"There can't be any doubt about it. Some one gave it to her."

She caught her lower lip between her teeth, stared at the floor, and thought hard.

"Which one was it?" she muttered at last. "We ought to know."

"Why? Since she wanted it done, or said she did, the responsibility is hers. Why do we have to know which, if any one, did it?"

"Just the same, we must know." She spoke almost fiercely now. "We ought to be able to find out. It was done the fifth day before she died. I've studied up the effects of that poison. Its full action usually takes either four or five days, but I remember noticing a big change in her the morning of the fourth day, and she herself spoke of it. The puzzling thing is that

she had no visitors either of those days or nights. At least I can speak for the days, and so far as I know no one came either night."

"Could she have had it hidden and taken it herself?"

"Where could she have hidden it? Her tables were out of reach, she couldn't walk, and we made up her bed two or three times a day and sometimes oftener, if she was restless. I explained all that to you in our first talk."

He watched her, following without conscious effort the swift working of her mind. His warming sense of comfort in her presence was over. Her next words were what he had expected them to be:

"I wonder if any one *could* have come at night. . . . I'll see Miss Connolly . . . Mrs. Mason . . . to-morrow," she suddenly announced.

"That won't be necessary. I'm to see her in my office to-morrow afternoon." As he spoke Long hoped Mrs. Mason would be within telephone reach. If not, he would go to her new home in the country. He had her address.

"Oh!" Miss Webb spoke rather flatly, as if disappointed.

"See here," the lawyer said dispassionately, "you're going entirely too fast again. And you've forgotten this: Even if Miss Chandler did ask that hideous service of some one, and some one gave it, there's nothing to be gained by knowing which one. What could you do if you did know? Surely you realize," he added steadily, after giving her a moment to take

this in, "that the last thing in the world Catherine Chandler would want would be any publicity about it. You've admitted that she ordered you to keep your mouth shut."

He watched the changing expression on her face. She was clearly a battle-field of doubt and conflicting impulses.

"Just the same," she said at last, between her teeth, "I intend to know who did it."

"I suppose we'll soon know," he agreed. "In the meantime, don't make it any harder for those youngsters than it needs to be. They're in a hideous position. As young George puts it, they're 'between the devil and the deep sea.'"

She seemed struck by the admission.

"Did he say that?" she asked eagerly; and he saw her turning it over in her mind. "It's exactly where they are," she said at last, "and I'm glad of it."

He studied her thoughtfully.

"You seem very hard, sometimes, for a thoroughly kind woman," he told her. "Yet you say you were fond of Catherine Chandler."

"I said I loved her, and I did. I still do. I shall love her memory all my life. But I'm not wasting time grieving for her. I'm doing the job she asked me to do. And, as I've said before, I haven't your patience with her murderers."

It was not a jocund note to end an interview on, and Long experienced a deepening depression as he dressed for dinner. He dined at his club that night.

Impossible to face that empty chair at the other end of the table . . . or that chattering group. . . . Come to think of it, though, there wouldn't be a chattering group. There would be only Miss Webb and Naomi and Henry and the Dixon twins; and he couldn't fancy much cheerfulness there when the young folks knew, as they must, why Aunt Anne had gone away. Catherine, poor Catherine, was spending the evening in her room, and the Troubadour would certainly keep Lily out of the house till bedtime. . . . Every one knew about Lily, too. Every one knew everything, it now seemed to Long, except who poisoned Catherine Chandler.

He played bridge in the card-room after dinner, with three old friends. The game was not interesting and he was not sorry to have it interrupted by a telephone call.

"Mr. Long? Cary speaking," a voice at the other end of the wire informed him. "Cary, Doctor Cary," it impatiently repeated, as he failed to respond. "I've just called up the house and they said you were at the club. If you can spare fifteen minutes I'd like to have a little talk with you."

"Why, yes, Doctor, of course I can." Long spoke with a conscious effort to seem natural. "Do you want me to come to your office?"

"No, I'm not far from your club. I'll come right over, if it's all right. Can you see me in ten minutes or so?"

"Of course," Long said again. "Any time." He

went into the lounge, found a secluded table in a corner, and sat there frowning so absorbedly over some legal papers that no one ventured to approach him till a club servant reported that Doctor Cary was in the reception room.

"Bring him in," Long directed, and felt a slight chill run the length of his spine which repeated itself as he rose and shook hands with the old doctor. Cary was not at ease, and he tried to conceal the fact by an added brusqueness of manner. He was not a man to waste time in discussing side interests. Almost before he had settled in his arm-chair and lit the cigar Long offered him, he went to the point of his visit.

"I want to talk to you about something," he began almost accusingly.

"Yes?" His host waited.

"I've come to the conclusion that we ought to have that woman's body exhumed and a post mortem made."

"You mean Miss Chandler's?"

"Of course I mean Miss Chandler's. Who the devil but Miss Chandler could I mean?"

"Then you've changed your mind, Doctor?" Long asked the question courteously, but something in his manner emphasized his words and Cary got it.

"I won't say that. But the infernal thing keeps coming up in my mind, and I'd like to have it settled one way or the other."

"Even though you promised her there wouldn't be any autopsy?"

"It wasn't exactly a promise. I simply scoffed at

the idea of having one. I let her see such a thought hadn't occurred to me. But see here!" Cary leaned forward and sent a keen look into the other's eyes. Long met it steadily. "You don't want an autopsy, do you?"

"If you will think back a little, Doctor, you will remember that I came to your office not long ago to suggest one. You pooh-poohed the idea. You said she didn't want it done, and I'm beginning to understand why. In fact, I think, I can throw a good deal of light on the whole subject. I've wanted a talk with you, and I meant to telephone you to-day for an appointment to discuss matters. But it's been a pretty hectic day. We've been putting Mrs. Price into a sanatorium."

"Anne Price? Again? Poor woman!" Cary's interest in this announcement momentarily diverted him from the larger issue. "A nice creature at her best," he added reminiscently. "I knew her when she was a young thing; a beauty and a belle. They didn't give you much hope at the sanatorium, I suppose."

"Practically none at all."

Cary nodded. "No constitution to begin with, no self-control or conscience left, and a system with every organ poisoned by this time. She's been using the stuff about ten years, and she was so damned clever that no one suspected it till a few years ago. Too bad." He dropped the subject of Mrs. Price. "You were saying . . ."

"That I'd have come to see you to-day if I hadn't been attending to Mrs. Price's affairs, and inciden-

tally getting rid of the woman who's been her worst influence. Do you know anything about a creature they call 'Madame Dalmier'?"

Cary shot a quick glance at him, and then gave his mind to the question:

"Dalmier . . . Dalmier . . . yes, I've heard of her. She must be that Russian who has a supposed cure for morphinists. In reality she runs a house of indulgence and gives 'em the needle herself. I've heard some appalling yarns about a place she ran in New York. I believe it was shut up a couple of years ago."

"It seems that it was. That's why she started in here in Waterford. Thinks she's safer in a smaller city, but I understand she's been moving from pillar to post. Her latest move was to Mrs. Price's old apartment. We had to get her out of there this morning."

Cary nodded. "She ought to be electrocuted," he dispassionately observed. "But she's only one of dozens of 'em, operating in big cities as openly as the speak-easies, and using the speak-easy as a cloak and feeder. It's pretty rotten to have them spreading to cities like Waterford. You wouldn't think a town of two hundred thousand would have enough addicts to make them pay."

He recalled his larger interest.

"About this Chandler affair . . ." he resumed.

"I was coming to see you after we got back from High Crest, but it was pretty late . . ."

"So you've put Mrs. Price in High Crest? A good place, but infernally expensive."

"She won't last long. And it was the only way to soften the situation for the two girls; to make them feel that everything was being done. As to the Chandler matter," Long hurried on, having given himself plenty of time to think, "I believe I can throw some light on that."

He repeated the gist of his talk with George Dixon and Mrs. Warren Mason, suppressing the matter of the checks made out to Miss Connolly. Knowledge of those checks would certainly prejudice this influential physician against the nurse. Cary listened in a frowning silence broken by an occasional comment or ejaculation.

"I don't think the night-nurse told me all she knew," Long added. "In fact, I'm pretty sure she didn't. So I'm going to see her again to-morrow."

"And you want to postpone the p.m.?"

"I think it would be wise."

Cary drummed with his big fingers on the arm of the chair he sat in.

"Do you believe those stories?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes. I'm inclined to."

"I'm not sure I am. Aren't they the sort of yarn that drunken young wastrel of a Dixon would cook up to save himself and the girl, if poison were discovered?"

"It's possible, but I don't think it's probable."

"It's damned probable, if you ask me." Cary stood up with the air of one who had said his say. "However, a few days more or less won't matter," he added

as he bent over the ash-tray to crush out the burning end of his discarded cigar. "Let me know if the Connolly girl puts up anything new."

"I'll do that. But, Doctor—" they were both standing now and Long stopped the other's big figure as it was hurrying away—"what's to be done if we do discover poison? Have you thought of that?"

Cary's face showed that he had. He straightened his huge shoulders.

"We'd better wait and meet that situation if it comes up," he suggested.

Long accompanied him to the club's tiled vestibule and watched him trudge away, putting down his big feet with uncompromising firmness.

CHAPTER XIV

"THE BUNCH" CONFERS

RETURNING from his club after the interview with Cary, Long crept into the Chandler house like a thief in the night. His one hope was to get up to his room unobserved, but it was not to be realized. As he crossed the threshold he nearly ran into the Troubadour, who was just leaving the house. The young man's anxious face cleared at sight of him.

"Oh, here you are, sir!" he exclaimed with relief. "I'd just given you up."

"Did you want to see me, Bryce?" The older man spoke wearily.

"Yes, sir, if you can spare a few minutes. I know it's been a hard day. But I think . . . that is, I hope . . . that what I want to tell you will cheer you up a bit. The others have gone to bed," he added as Long still hesitated. "They've been talking things over, and they wanted you to know what's been decided."

"Oh, well, I suppose I ought to know what's been decided," Long murmured ironically.

The Troubadour ignored the tone.

"The living-room's empty and the fire's still burning there," he mentioned. "If you'll go in and sit down I'll bring you the cigars."

Long went into the living-room and dropped into a seat beside the fire. The big empty Chinese chair of the mistress of the house was directly opposite him, and as he realized this he made an instinctive movement to rise. Then he sank back again. He was too tired to stir, but he shook his head at his invisible hostess.

"Kate, how could you?" he muttered. "How *could* you?"

The Troubadour entered and proceeded to make him comfortable. He drew a small table to the side of Long's chair, put a box of cigars within easy reach, and, when Long took one, lit and held a match for it. The Troubadour's movements were not so swift as usual, and his round face looked gray. Long experienced a pang of sympathy.

"You look about the way I feel, Bryce," he said kindly.

The young man settled into a chair beside him and fixed his unwinking gaze on the embers.

"It's been pretty awful," he admitted. "But it's the beginning of daylight for me." As Long looked at him in silence he added in a low voice: "A few months more with her mother would just about have finished Lil, in spite of all I could do. I suppose you know, sir, that Mrs. Price had reached the stage of wanting every one else to take the stuff with her. She was offering it to Ethel and George, and she kept at Lil and Catherine all the time."

"Bryce," Long said abruptly, "why aren't you doing some work?"

The boy seemed surprised at the sharpness of the tone with which the question was asked.

"Do you mean why haven't I a job?" he asked without resentment. "I had one, a pretty good one in a broker's office, up till eight months ago. I'd had it two years. Then when I realized how things were with Lil, I dropped it and gave all my time to her. That seemed to be my job then, and it is still. I don't suppose you'll believe it, but I've worked like a dog for the last eight months, watching Lil and her mother, running after them, and helping to get Mrs. Price out of trouble. She had begun to steal things, you know, to get money for the stuff. The friends she stole from would tell me, and I'd tell Catherine, and we'd get the things out of pawn and give them back.

"All her friends got so they'd let us know. It was understood. But it wasn't always easy to find out where she pawned what she took. About all the allowance Cath and Lil had has gone that way," he interpolated. "But that was only one phase of it. Morphine seems to rob its victims of every human quality. There were other things she did, awful things. I can't talk about them—"

"Of course not," Long hastily agreed. The last thing he himself desired was to discuss those other phases.

"Anyway, I wasn't idle," the Troubadour muttered, still staring into the fire.

"Did you think it was wise to marry Lily under such conditions?"

"I think the only wisdom there is lies in standing by the girl you love," the Troubadour said simply. "Anyway, it's the only wisdom I've got. And I was in love with Lil long before she formed this habit. But that isn't what I wanted to talk to you about to-night," he went on with a quiet dignity that checked any further discussion of his own affairs. "I want to tell you what went on at the powwow."

"Who was in the powwow?"

"All of us. Lil and I got home about nine and Lil wanted Catherine, so we made Catherine come downstairs. Ethel had to make the formidable pilgrimage to Miss Chandler's room, and we waited for her here, and Naomi and Henry wandered in about ten. We talked about Mrs. Price, and every one was wonderful to the two girls. The trouble drew us together as if we were all brothers and sisters," the Troubadour went on, with that touch of effeminacy in him Long had always disliked. To-night he did not notice it.

"When Ethel came back after the pilgrimage she was almost hysterical," Bryce continued. "She told us all that had happened up there, just what her aunt had said in that phonograph record. It was really awful," he sedately repeated, "but it drew us closer than ever. I could feel the cords, myself. It was as if we were all holding hands against something that was threat-

ening, a sort of rising tide of horror that might do for us. Everybody was perfectly sober. Ethel had taken a few drinks before she went up, to give her Dutch courage, but she was steady enough when she came back, cold sober, and scared stiff. Not about herself, but about George—"

The Troubadour stopped for a moment, as if a new thought had struck him.

"I suppose I'm beginning all this at the wrong end," he said in a businesslike tone. "But I'm sure you'll make allowance. I had a pretty bad time with Lil when she found out about her mother—"

"I bet you had. But I hope you put all the responsibility of that on me."

"Of course we did," Bryce admitted. "Had to. Cath and I would have lost all our influence with Lil if we hadn't. Besides, it *was* you. We'd never have found the nerve for it; or if we'd whipped up the nerve we wouldn't have had the money. . . . But to go on—"

"Yes, please go on."

"You're about all in, aren't you, sir?" the Troubadour stopped to ask, with an understanding look at him. "You really ought to have a drink."

"No, thanks."

"Of course you're right. When one sees what the effect of drink is on oneself," the Troubadour said, with a man-of-the-world expression that sat oddly on his cherubic face, "it's easy enough to understand why weaker natures go under to it." And Long hid a smile behind his cigar.

"They use it as a pick-me-up when they're down and out," the Troubadour went on as if he were advancing a new thought, "and they find it works. After that it's just a question of a habit that grows till it gets the best of them."

"You young folks oughtn't to need pick-me-ups," Long mentioned testily.

"It doesn't follow that we're happy because we're young," the Troubadour gently reminded him. "Do you think Catherine has been happy these last few years? It's been straight hell for Cath and Lil and me. You know what Naomi's been through, but I guess even you haven't much idea of the things that happened on that little chicken farm while Sabin was there. I didn't know, myself, till Lil told me about them, while we were riding to-day. Naomi loves George and he adores her, but she swears she'll never marry him, and he's the sort that goes right under when things break wrong for him. Ethel tried to hold George back, and when she found she couldn't she decided to go the limit, too. As for Henry . . ."

"What's wrong with Henry?" Long grimly inquired.

"Nothing; and that's exactly what's wrong with Henry. He's lived by himself and for himself ever since he was fourteen. He works over his ledgers all day and over his first editions all evening. He visits his father once a year, but they don't mean anything to each other. He has no more idea of life than an angleworm has. He's never lived nor loved

nor suffered." He summed up Henry's case in a final pitying sentence: "He isn't human."

Long sighed. His own case, he had begun to realize, was much like Henry's.

"All that being admitted," he said, "suppose you come to the point and tell me what has been decided to-night."

The Troubadour smiled at him. It was a smile unexpectedly sweet, boyish and lovable.

"I was really getting round to that, sir, though you mightn't think it. But first I wanted to be sure you've got the bunch sized up right. Things have been moving so fast that it would be natural enough if you got the wrong dope on them. And not one of them was normal when they came. You see, they'd all been hanging on by their eyelashes, waiting for Miss Chandler's money to ease things up, and the shock of not getting it simply knocked them out."

"I know. I know."

"They didn't understand you, either, just at first. They thought . . . well . . ."

"They thought I was a hypocrite and a spy and a general nuisance. I know that, too. Bryce, you're telling me a lot of stuff I know."

"Forgive me, sir, but I had to be sure what you know and what you don't know. Do you remember the morning—by Jove! it seems weeks ago, but it was only a few days!—when Catherine said at breakfast that she thought Aunt C. C. was trying to help them all?"

"Yes."

"Well, they jeered at the time, and Miss Webb was about the worst of the lot. But the whole bunch has begun to realize that Catherine was right. She and Naomi got it first, from Aunt C. C.'s phonograph talks. The others got it in the same way a little later, but they wouldn't let themselves take it in. Naomi caught on when you hustled her brute of a father out of the way, and Cath and Lil certainly took it in last night and to-day. Taking together what you're doing and what Aunt C. C. is saying and has done, they know now, all of them, that the two of you are trying to pull them in and start them over. And what they agreed on to-night was to give you a leg-up on it. They're going to have a new deal all around."

"I'm glad of that."

"I suppose what it amounts to," the Troubadour went on, gazing thoughtfully into the fire, "is that the successive jolts they've had have brought them to their senses. When Ethel came downstairs she was so off her trolley that she repeated Miss Chandler's entire talk, almost word for word. You know how Miss Chandler could put things over, when she really let herself go. Well, it seems that to-night she described Ethel's and George's future and finish in a way that straightened Ethel's bob. At the end of it all she made one point that hit Ethel in the solar plexus. George admitted that she had given him the same jolt, and that he'd been thinking of it ever since.

"She reminded them that each was devoted to the

other and that each would do for the other what neither would do for himself or herself. She said George would never pull up on his own account or even on Naomi's, but he might do it to save Ethel. And she said Ethel had gone too far now to think of herself, but was still capable of thinking of George. She suggested that they make a compact. Ethel is to lay off the stuff as long as George does, but the minute one takes a drink it releases the other. That makes George responsible for Ethel and Ethel responsible for George, you see; and one drink for either means that the other climbs on the toboggan again and goes whirling down. Pretty neat of the old girl, wasn't it?"

"Will it work?"

"If it doesn't, nothing will. It's the one plan I'd check. You see, Miss Chandler didn't mince matters when she told them what would happen if they kept on as they've been doing. She didn't stop till she landed them both in psychopathic wards and the Potter's Field. That voice and that prediction going on in that dark room won't be forgotten very soon by either of them. So to-night George and Ethel gave each other their promises, before the whole crowd of us, and we're all going to help. That stirred Lil. She had got hers, too, all right, up in that black hole; and again last night and to-day. So to-night she gave me her promise to drop drink and morphine. It was the first time she had been willing to do that, and I've never known her to break a promise. From the moment she made that one I was sure she was safe."

"You think she'll keep it?"

"I know she'll keep it," said the Troubadour, whose devotion to his Lily had flickered in and out of his story like a dancing flame. "But she can't do it alone, and she's going to have an awful fight. She's to start a cure to-morrow right here in the house, and I'll stand by till it's over. Miss Webb has agreed to help, too. That woman is a trump and I've always known it. She didn't understand them at first, any more than you did; in fact, not half so well. But she's catching on now, all right. She and Mrs. Price had some frightful times. I guess you didn't know about those. Mrs. Price had lied about her to us and to everybody else, even to the servants; and Miss Webb knew it, but didn't want to do anything about it till you caught on. Mrs. Price must have told you some awful whoppers about her."

"She did," Long gravely admitted. He rose. "All this about the feet on the new highway is good hearing, my boy," he said. "It's the best kind of news and I'm glad you told me. You can all count on me for anything I can do. But just now I'm going to bed."

The Troubadour went upstairs with him and in the top hall both paused.

"Then you're going back to work, after Lil's cure?" Long asked.

"Yes, sir. My old job with Brown and Butler is waiting for me. They've told me so."

Long hesitated. "I suppose in the meantime you're

rather short of cash," he suggested. "If a loan would help you—"

But the Troubadour was backing away, his round face blazing.

"Thanks awfully, sir, but I couldn't think of that," he stammered in a panic. "I've never borrowed in my life. My mother left me a little money and the interest just keeps me alive. I'm managing on that, and George and Henry are letting me sleep on the couch in their sitting-room when I stay too late to catch the trolley. If you don't mind my sticking around the house a little longer—"

"Glad to have you," Long said cordially. "Good night."

He went to his room pondering the strangeness of that assurance as addressed to the Troubadour.

The Mrs. Warren Mason who entered Long's office at three o'clock the next afternoon was not the radiant bride of the previous visit. She was a serious woman. Her expression was calm and purposeful, and she was accompanied by a broad-shouldered, good-featured young man whose dark face revealed a fixed determination to stand no nonsense in this interview. She introduced this young man as her husband, Doctor Warren Mason, and that gentleman at once and somewhat truculently assumed the rôle of her protector.

"I'm butting into this thing, Mr. Long," he began stiffly, "because it's worrying my wife. Naturally, I don't want her worried."

"Of course you don't. Neither do I. Since we're agreed on that, we ought to get along swimmingly."

Long seated them comfortably with their backs to the wall and their faces toward him and the wide windows of the big private office. Then he sat down at his desk and formally opened the interview.

"Mrs. Mason," he began, "do you happen by any chance to remember any special incidents that occurred the Thursday evening before Miss Chandler's death?"

He saw her face flush, then pale, and caught a slight reflection of these phenomena on the face of her husband. Both were silent.

"I'm trying to think," Mrs. Mason announced at last. "Do you mean the night you came to see Miss Chandler?"

"Yes, I mean that night, five nights before her death. Miss Chandler sent for me and I came."

"I remember perfectly," Mrs. Mason said. "I telephoned for you, myself, and gave the message to your servant, Stevens."

"I'm glad the details are clear in your memory, for I want you to tell me all about the other visitor who came that night."

"The other visitor?" she faltered, and glanced at her husband.

"Now, see here, Mr. Long," the bridegroom said hastily, "perhaps you don't realize that you're butting into Miss Chandler's private affairs."

"Please don't take that attitude, Doctor Mason.

And try to realize, yourself, that for more than thirty years I've been Miss Chandler's confidential man of business. So far as I was concerned, she had no private affairs."

"She seems to have kept a few things up her sleeve at the last," the visitor muttered, and Long smiled.

"She may have tried to," he admitted, "but they're dropping out pretty fast these days."

The smile and confession lightened the atmosphere. Doctor Warren Mason grinned. Long added another brick to the little structure of understanding that was rising between them.

"I knew some one had been there just before I came that evening," he explained, "and I inferred that it was a man, because there was a half-burned cigar butt in the ash-tray and the room was full of cigar smoke. I gathered, too, that he had tired Miss Chandler and made her pretty angry. I think I know who he was, but I want to be sure. Who was he?"

He asked the question so casually that the answer came out almost before Mrs. Warren Mason realized it.

"Mr. Sabin."

"Sabin? Ah!" Long nodded. "I thought so. Had he been there before?"

"Yes, but only once."

"Now we're getting somewhere," the lawyer affably assured her. "Tell me all you can remember about both visits. You arranged them, I suppose?" he brought out as an afterthought.

"Yes, sir. It was one of the things she wanted me to do."

"Begin at the beginning and tell me just how you managed it."

Sustained by an encouraging nod from her husband, Mrs. Mason began her recital.

"First of all, she told me Miss Sabin had a scoundrel for a father and that he was hiding now at her chicken farm and that it would be all up with him if the police found him. That interested me, because I admired Miss Sabin awfully. She's so lovely, and she had always been nice to me when she came to see Miss Chandler. I didn't know what her father had done, but I decided it was bootlegging or something like that. So many gentlemen seem to get into trouble that way, nowadays."

"They do," Long said gravely and took care not to meet Mason's eyes.

"Miss Chandler said she wanted to see Mr. Sabin, and she knew I could drive a car. She offered me a hundred dollars to go to the farm in her roadster and get him and bring him to her. She gave me a note to give him, and it had to be done without Miss Sabin's knowing anything about it. Miss Chandler said she had a plan to get rid of him. And a little later she said there was something she wanted to ask him to do first."

"She trusted you, didn't she?" Long commented dryly.

"Yes, she did, and I never knew why. For she

knew Miss Webb loved her, yet she never told Miss Webb a thing."

"I guess she knew she could wind you around her finger, Nellie," Doctor Mason unexpectedly suggested. He added to Long: "If there's any blame in all this, it's that old maid's. She lay there for three solid months cooking up one scheme after another and getting Nellie to help her to carry them out."

"I agree with you," Long said gravely.

The admission encouraged "Nellie," who continued her report with increased assurance.

"I earned that hundred dollars hard," she said defensively. "I went to the farm three times before I found Sabin and the housekeeper there alone, and the second time I almost ran into Miss Naomi. The third time I had to pay the housekeeper ten dollars to take Miss Chandler's letter to Mr. Sabin. But after that it was all clear sailing, and Miss Chandler gave back the ten dollars the next day. Mr. Sabin went off and dolled himself up, and then came to the roadster with me—I'd left it on a side road—and I drove him to Miss Chandler's house. He had to hang around in the shrubbery, of course, till Miss Webb was out of the way, but it was almost six when we got there, so she left in an hour or so. Then Sabin rang the bell and gave Mr. White's card to Johnson—"

"He was the man that used the card?"

"Yes, and that made it all seem quite regular. Mr. Sabin and Miss Chandler had a long talk and high words, and Miss Chandler got quite excited. Then I

had to leave Nora in charge of the patient and take Mr. Sabin out again to the chicken farm. He made me stop at a second-hand shop in town and he was in there half an hour and came out with a big bundle of cheap-looking clothes. There was an old cap on top of it, so I guess he'd got some sort of a disguise."

"How long before her death was this first visit made?"

"I'm not sure, but it was after the visit of the specialists, a few days after, I think; and they came about six weeks before she died. I remember that Miss Chandler used their decision as an argument when she was persuading me. She said: 'I'm strong enough for anything. Didn't the bigwigs give me two years more?'"

"You didn't hear what she and Sabin said when they were together?"

"Of course not. I never heard anything any of her callers said."

"And you heard no more about him till you had to go for him again that Thursday night?"

"I knew Miss Chandler had had a letter from him a few days before his second visit. It excited her and she read it two or three times and then tore it in pieces and make me burn them. When she ordered me to go and get him again, I didn't want to. It was too big a risk."

"Odd she didn't have Naomi do that," Long mused aloud.

"Miss Sabin wouldn't do it. Miss Chandler asked

her to in the beginning. Miss Sabin's one thought was to keep her father from getting to see Miss Chandler."

"How do you know that?"

She got the famous eye-flash with that question and it disconcerted her. She hesitated, but the eye-flash called for the truth.

"Because when I took him home that first night she caught us. She had suspected something. Her father did some roaming around at night, it appeared, but this was different. She had made the housekeeper admit that a lady had called. She was watching for us and saw the car coming. She came down the road and spoke to us when we were getting out a little way from the farm. Of course when she recognized me she caught on to the whole thing and I thought she'd go crazy. I never saw a cool person so much excited. She laid me out cold! It was that terrible white anger, and a kind of panic with it. I could see her father was afraid of her. That surprised me. He had seemed such a cool customer. . . .

"I drove forty-five miles an hour coming and going that night. I might have been arrested. But Miss Chandler gave me two hundred instead of one hundred for the job. She was always generous," the speaker handsomely admitted.

"Of course Sabin was alone with Miss Chandler while he was in her house?"

"Oh, yes, all the time."

"Then, you say, you went for him a second time the Thursday before she died?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you manage it that time, with Miss Sabin on guard?"

"It was easy enough. Mr. Sabin and I had made plans. Miss Sabin has a telephone. Her father never answered it when she was in the house. If I got her I hung up without speaking. I had to telephone eight or ten times before I got him. Then I arranged to meet him at a place about three miles from the farm, and he walked there."

"How long did he stay that second night?"

"Not long. We were there before six (I always 'went on' at six, you know). But he had to wait till Miss Webb left at seven before he came into the house. He was with Miss Chandler half an hour or so, but I couldn't get him out of the house before you came, so I had to put him in the upper store-room. Then, as soon as you left, I had to take him home, and I didn't get back till almost eleven. I guess I broke all the records that night. Miss Webb got in less than half an hour after I did. It was a pretty close shave. Miss Webb looked in on Miss Chandler, as she always did before she went to bed, and she made a fuss over the condition the patient was in. I had forgotten to give Miss Chandler her second powder. So Miss Webb gave her one, and Miss Chandler took it and told Miss Webb to stop fussing and go to bed.

"Miss Webb said that after that she wouldn't leave the house again at night. But I guess she couldn't have gone anyway, because Miss Chandler was a lot worse

the next day, and she wasn't able to see any one at all except Mr. Sloan, and we were both very busy. You know she died five days later."

"And that's the whole story? This time you haven't kept anything back?"

He saw the pair exchange glances. Then Mrs. Mason said:

"Not a thing, Mr. Long."

"All right. Thank you."

Both visitors were impressed by the change in the lawyer's manner. He was very serious, but some tension he had been under seemed to have loosened. He bade them good-by with formal politeness and he did not accompany them to the elevator. Instead, in the solitude of his own office, he took up the telephone and asked for a number.

"Doctor Cary?" he said when he had got it. "Good. I thought this was your office hour." His next words came out in a lower tone. "You remember that post mortem we were speaking of last night? . . . Well, I think we'd better have it. . . . Yes, that's what I said. I think we'd better have it. How soon can you get around to it?"

Cary's brisk response indicated a certain relief.

"Oh, right away," he said. "There's no one else to consult, you see. I'll notify the cemetery people to-night, and they'll exhume the body to-morrow or next day. Then I'll have Finley Brown make the p.m. He's the best man we have for that sort of thing. We'll know the result in three or four days, at the

most. By the way—" his voice changed—"you haven't forgotten that our old friend didn't want this done?"

"I'm afraid the time is past when we can think of that. Miss Chandler started something, and in justice to others we've got to get to the bottom of it."

Long hung up the receiver and for a long time sat staring at it absently, but he did not see it. He was recalling a moment in that office when Naomi Sabin had turned her back on a situation even her courage could not face.

CHAPTER XV

HANDSOME HARRY EXPLAINS

THAT night Long went home to dinner. He didn't want to. He wanted to go to the club again. But his duty seemed clear and was made easier than he had expected. The entire family, excepting Mrs. Price but counting the Troubadour, who now had to be counted, was assembled in the living-room with the Troubadour singing at the piano; and as he returned the greetings of the company Long was impressed by individual changes in manner and expressions.

Lily, seated very close to the Troubadour, still wore her characteristic look of impish recklessness, but her features were twitching with nervousness and she revealed an unusual dependence on her companion. That youth interrupted his song to light a cigarette for her. During the process he promised to feed her at the table with his own hand if she would agree to drink six spoonfuls of soup and to eat four mouthfuls of fish and the leg of a chicken. His absorption in this pending contract suggested that he considered himself alone with Lily in the universe, but he emerged from the great outer spaces long enough to nod affably to the new-comer.

"We were afraid you weren't coming, sir. Awfully glad to see you," he assured Long. "No, beloved of my soul, I said six spoonfuls, not four. You must play fair." He kissed her ear as he spoke and Lily accepted the attention with a grimace. The Troubadour resumed his song.

Miss Webb was seated on a davenport a little way from the group. Yielding to a strong impulse he did not analyze, Long crossed the room and sat down beside her.

"Another hard day?" she asked sympathetically, under cover of the talk around them. He was watching the serious faces, the unsmiling lips of the "youngsters," and at first he did not hear the question. George, he realized, was almost as nervous as Lily, and Naomi was plainly sunk in a black abstraction. Catherine's tangerine complexion had a slightly greenish cast. Ethel and Henry talked with the deliberate and painstaking effort of those who see the path of duty straight before them and are set to follow it; and George occasionally broke in on their talk with personal comments of an acid nature. Long met Hope Webb's brown eyes. The understanding in them touched him.

"It's been pretty hard," he admitted.

"Have you seen Miss Connolly?"

"Yes. And her husband, too. He came with her."

"What did she say?"

She asked the question with such intensity that he raised a quieting hand.

"I'll tell you about it to-morrow."

"Not to-night?"

"No, I'd rather wait till tea-time to-morrow, if you don't mind. Perhaps we can arrange to have tea alone in the library."

"That will be easy. The others never go into that room."

"I'm impressed by their seeming change of heart. Are you?"

"Indeed I am," she said almost solemnly.

"Then you believe in it?" He asked the question with eagerness that made her smile.

"Of course I believe in it. How could I help it? They're up against something so appalling that it has put the fear of God into every one of them."

"You mean Mrs. Price and Lily, and Naomi's trouble?"

"You know perfectly well that I don't mean anything of the kind."

She was speaking in a tone so low that he had to lean very close to hear her.

"They were shocked by those things, of course," she went on, "but all except Miss Price and Miss Sabin will soon forget them. Youth doesn't worry long about the troubles of others, you know, and they're a self-centered lot."

"Just what do you mean, then?"

"They're concerned with their own tragedy, the tragedy we've already talked over. Every last one of them realizes now that there is a suspicion of poison-

ing in Miss Chandler's case. Every one knows that Miss Chandler tried to get poison from some of them, and every one whose conscience is clear is suspecting all the rest and knows that all the rest are exactly as suspicious. It's a hellish position to be in, as poor George said when he told you they were 'between the devil and the deep sea.' It would make worse youngsters than they are feel like turning over a new page. For they know that if they'd been leading different lives they'd hardly have been suspected. Their record is the worst evidence against them."

Long answered the words that had most impressed him:

"What makes you so sure they feel that way?"

"Catherine Price told me."

"Oh!"

"She didn't do it in cold blood. She came to apologize to me for all her mother's slanders. She needn't have done that, poor child, but she thought she had to; and incidentally we had a long talk about Lily, and one thing led to another. She's a fine girl. I admire Catherine Price very much. And I understand now why Miss Chandler didn't tell us more about them all. She wanted us to have open minds and form our own opinions, regardless of hers."

Long looked at Henry Hutchins talking sedately to a yawning Ethel about a sale of old books he had attended that afternoon.

"Do you imagine that Henry considers himself in a hellish position?" he asked ironically.

"If not, he's the only one of them who doesn't. He hasn't enough imagination to take in the situation. But I think even he is having some new emotions under that brown-front exterior of his."

"If he's having any emotions, they're new to him," Long agreed. "Before we drop the subject, tell me something," he added. He gave her the question eye to eye: "Am I right in thinking you're absolutely convinced that no one saw Miss Chandler during the last five days and nights of her life except Sloan, the lawyer, and you and Miss Connolly and Doctor Cary?"

"I know positively that no one else saw her in the daytime. She was so ill the last four days, from the time Mr. Sloan left and her letter to you was finished, that it was out of the question to let any one else see her. She was exhausted. I noticed the change in her as soon as I came on in the morning. She was so much weaker that I didn't dare to let Miss Sabin see her when she called."

"Oh! Did Naomi call that morning?"

"Yes, bright and early, about eight. She said she had come into town early, on important business. She seemed very nervous about something, and asked particularly if there had been any change in her aunt's condition. I told her Miss Chandler seemed a little weaker, but that she was planning to see some man on business later that day, much against my wishes. I said I couldn't let her see Miss Chandler, because Miss Chandler must save her strength for that interview."

Miss Sabin left her love and a fat envelop for Miss Chandler and went away."

"A fat envelop? You mean a letter?"

"No. Miss Chandler opened the envelop while I was in the room. It had a lot of bills and a piece of paper with a few lines on it. I had got a thousand dollars out of her desk for Miss Chandler the day before. They were crisp new bills, and so were the ones that dropped out of the letter. But of course they couldn't have been the same."

"Why not?" Long spoke absently, his mind busy with this unexpected development.

"How could Naomi Sabin have got hold of the money?"

"That's so. Did Miss Chandler make any comment on the little episode?"

"She groaned and tore up the scrap of paper, and told me to throw the pieces in the fire and put the money in her desk, which I did."

"Did Naomi come again?"

"No, but she telephoned every day."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"I didn't think it was important."

"H-m." He returned to his first question: "You're sure Miss Chandler didn't see any one else?"

"I can answer for the last four days and nights of her life, for I was constantly in and out of her room. That's what makes it so hard . . ."

"That's what I wanted to be sure of. You can swear, if necessary, that no one but the doctor and

nurses and Sloan saw her after Thursday night?"

"Yes, I can swear to that. But I want to know who was with her Thursday night."

"To-morrow afternoon," he repeated. He rose and strolled over to where Catherine stood by the mantel, staring down at the fire.

"Well, my dear," he said very gently.

"It isn't so damned well," Catherine assured him. "I'm getting pretty bad reports about Mother."

"I was afraid you would."

"I knew I would. But they're shocks, just the same. I can't bear to think of what she's going through. However, I'm not going to talk about that now. I want to thank you for letting Dick stay on."

"You have faith in young Bryce, haven't you?"

"Absolutely. Dickie's a one-woman man. He acts like a congenital idiot sometimes. Listen to him singing Lil to sleep this minute! But as long as she's on earth and needs him, he'll come across like a ferry-boat." For a moment she was silent. Then she broke out under her breath: "Uncle Nicholas, I've got to ask you something." Her voice caught in her throat. She swallowed and went on. "Do you think that Mother . . . that Mother . . . had anything to do with . . . got anything for Aunt Catherine?"

He spoke quickly:

"You can put that thought right out of your mind, Catherine, for good and all. Your mother had absolutely nothing to do with it, if it was done."

She gave a little gasp. "You're *sure* of that?"

"I'm certain of it."

He watched her exhale a long breath.

"And Lil . . ." she said uncertainly.

"Lily had nothing whatever to do with it, either."

"God, but that's a relief!" She stood very still for a moment, taking in the comfort of the double assurance. "Uncle Nicholas," she said in a very low voice, "you speak as if . . . as if . . . you know who did it!"

"I think I do."

The words made her wheel around to face him.

"Then you ought to tell the rest of us," she brought out almost harshly, but in the same low tone. "What's the use of keeping seven people in a hell of suspicion? We've got enough to stand," she ended, "without that."

"Three of you already know you needn't worry. That is, I've told you and you will tell Lily and Bryce, who I suppose is worried on Lily's account. That leaves only Naomi, the Dixons, and Henry, and they'll know in a few days more, a week at the most. In the meantime I'd rather you didn't say anything to any one but your sister and Bryce, and make them realize it's confidential. Your mother, I'm sure, had no idea such a suspicion existed. So she isn't worrying."

"Not about that," Catherine confirmed. "Poor Mother!"

They went out to dinner, and Long found that in the table rearrangement made necessary by Mrs. Price's departure Miss Webb was at his right. The fact was comforting.

"What Catherine told you must have been a shock, even though I had prepared you," he said when they had a moment together.

"Yes, in one way. I'm sorry to think they're all suffering, for of course they're not all guilty."

"If any one is guilty, it's Catherine Chandler," Long said unexpectedly. "She admitted it in her letter, and though at the time I didn't understand, I know now what she meant." As his companion took this in silence, he went on. "She can't claim that this particular experiment of hers helped anybody. Instead it has done a lot of harm. I'm beginning to think I understand the situation. She began it to try people out, regardless of the fact that she had weaklings to deal with and that it was a devilish thing to try them out that way. She became interested in watching their reactions; and, running true to Catherine Chandler form, she kept up the experiment for the sake of the kick she got out of it. It interested her, gave her something new to think about. Can you deny that?"

"No, I'm afraid you're right."

The admission was so surprising that he turned to look at her.

"But she paid," Miss Webb ended with a sigh.

"I'm glad she paid. Oh, I don't mean I'm glad she was poisoned, if she was," he hurriedly amended. "But I'm glad she was frightened and ashamed of herself, and I think she was both. And I believe the sincere desire to help the youngsters came after she realized what she had done to them. It's in the nature of an

amende honorable. Incidentally she probably wore herself out trying to explain to them, and they didn't believe her. She got some of her retribution then and there."

Every one around them was animated now. Even Catherine Price gurgled over some nonsense of the Troubadour's. Hope Webb absently crumbled her dinner roll.

"I wish you'd tell me—" she began.

"To-morrow," he evaded, and turned to Naomi at his left, to describe a skidding experience he had gone through on the sleet-covered roads.

"My roadster simply swung around in circles," he said. "If any other car had happened to be close to me—"

"Please be careful, Uncle Nicholas," Naomi said quickly. "A lot depends on you just now. If anything happened to you I don't know what we'd do."

So it was "Uncle Nicholas" again. And "be careful." He was glad of that, and went up to his rooms feeling more cheerful. But as he reached the top hall he became conscious that Henry Hutchins was close behind him, and now that rather ponderous young man made a hesitating appeal.

"If you can spare a minute, sir," he began.

Long nodded resignedly and led the way into his room. He was getting used to this sort of thing, and Henry was entitled to his innings. Henry's words and actions revealed that he thought so, too. He dropped into a chair, refused the cigars and cigarettes

his host offered, and spoke in a tone he vainly tried to make matter-of-fact.

"This is an awful mess we're in, Mr. Long," he brought out.

"Just what do you mean, Henry?" Long lit his own cigar and stretched out comfortably in his chair.

"I guess you know what I mean. We, the family, have been talking it over for days, and if there's anything in the notion that things can be communicated occultly to other minds, I guess even the servants are onto it." As Long waited, he went on, speaking aggressively in his effort to keep cool: "What I'm talking about, of course, is this suspicion that Aunt Catherine died of poisoning, and that some of us gave her the poison at her own request, or got it for her."

"We're looking into the matter, Henry. I can't say much more than that just now." Long spoke so wearily that Hutchins glanced at him with concern. His manner grew milder.

"The others seem to think, sir . . . that is, some of them, talking it over in twos and threes . . . that . . . It's awfully hard to put it into words, but . . . well . . . Naomi seems to be the one really under . . ."

It was at this point that Long made a surprising discovery. Hutchins could not go on. There was a moment of silence. Then the young man began again:

"That's why I wanted to speak to you, sir. I haven't said anything to her yet, but I'm going to ask Naomi

to marry me. I've been in love with her for three years, but I thought there wasn't a chance for me. Now, if she's in trouble, I want to speak up. I . . . I want the right to stand by."

"That's very fine of you, Henry."

"Fine—rot! Excuse me, sir, but all I want is to look after her. I know she doesn't care for me. How could she?—a girl like that? But I'm a steady sort of chap; at least I suppose I am. Anyway, I'm slow and dull enough to be steady. I guess I don't know much about myself, really. I've never tried to think things out. But since all this came up, and I've seen so much of Naomi and realized what she's been through, I . . . I'm awfully anxious to help her. I don't care anything about what her father is. I don't care anything about what she did. I don't care anything about myself, either. I mean I'm not asking myself whether she loves me, or whether she ever will. That doesn't seem to matter. I just want to help her. Is there any way I can? Shall I ask her?"

"I think I would, my boy."

The older man was following with sympathetic eyes the difficult metamorphosis of the angleworm into an unselfish human being. He wished Catherine Chandler could have seen it, or Miss Webb; and he was conscious of a momentary surprise over this association of their personalities in his mind.

"I think Naomi will be very much touched," he went on. "Any girl should be, by such devotion at such

a time. But hasn't it occurred to you that she may love some one else?"

"Yes, sir. I know she has loved George for some time. But I hoped she was getting over it, for I hear she hasn't any intention of marrying him."

"Don't bank too much on that. Women change their minds about such things." Again Nicholas Long remembered the woman whose love for him had never changed, and his voice softened. "But ask Naomi, by all means," he said hastily. "Ask her, just the same. She'll be grateful to you all her life."

"What do you mean by that, sir?" Henry Hutchins stiffened as if the last words had been an electric shock. "You mean she needs—"

"No, no! I simply mean she will be touched by your faith in her—"

He stopped, amazed. Hutchins's broad shoulders sagged, his face dropped into shaking hands, and he gulped like a small boy. For a moment only he yielded to this wave of emotion. Then he sat up, pulled an immaculate handkerchief from his breast pocket, and wiped his eyes and nose.

"My dear chap!" Long exclaimed in dismay.

"Don't mind me," Hutchins said. "I'm acting like an awful ass, but it's just nerves. At least I suppose it is. Never had any before. But that remark of yours scared me. I seemed to see her going through . . . I haven't slept at all for three nights and I'm about all in."

"I fancy we're all in pretty much the same condition."

As they got up Long put a friendly hand on the big fellow's shoulder.

"Go to bed now and try to get a night's sleep."

"I can't sleep. . . . Then you think I might ask Naomi to-morrow?"

"If you get a good sleep to-night. Not otherwise."

This remark seemed cryptic to Henry. He was still doubtfully frowning over it when he went away. Long turned to the desk on which his house mail had been collecting for two days and picked up the pack of letters that lay there. On the top was a steamer letter. He thrust a forefinger under its flap and simultaneously dropped into a chair. Had Sabin left the *Argentine*? If he had . . . Long read the letter, written in the beautiful natural handwriting of the forger:

MY DEAR LONG:

I'm not usually troubled by an impulse to write letters, and ever since our tearful parting I've been kicking myself for not speaking to you about the little business I'm taking up with you now. It would have been easier and less compromising to talk it over; and it might have so occupied your time that you'd have been forced to cut out certain personal and tactless remarks which I find rankle in my memory. However, I didn't do it then, so this letter goes back to you by the pilot boat. And I can see you hustling it into your safe as soon as you've read it, with the deliberate purpose of holding it as a sword over my head.

All right. Hold it and be damned to you. It can't hurt me as long as I stay in South America, and as I have no idea of coming back to bask in your society and Naomi's, I don't see how it can hurt me at all. Moreover, you're in bad yourself. You "aided and abetted" my escape. On the other hand, if I'm silent I may be doing a wrong to a nice little night nurse who gave me two pleasant rides to and from Catherine Chandler's house, and who also, somewhat against her will, threw in a kiss which I took from her during our second ride. I am impulsive, and no longer as fatal to her sex as I was. Perhaps I owe her something. She seemed to think so, for she cried; though I must say, in justice to myself, she didn't cry long or hard. Anyway, here's my amend to her, and the fact that I'm making it convinces me at least that I'm still a man of honor.

Know then, to put it briefly, my dear Long, that my beloved sister-in-law asked me to get a certain poison for her, and that with my usual disposition to oblige the ladies I did so. The fact that she paid me for doing it should not loom too large in the case. It was an obscure and subtle poison, and I had a damned hard time getting it. I had to go back to one of my old haunts and look up a former pal and take a chance of capture, and even then I didn't get it till I'd made two attempts. So I may be said to have earned the money.

However, I didn't administer the poison to the lady. One has to draw the line somewhere, and I drew it right there. I felt that I had done a strong man's job and could call it a day when I left the stuff in her room. It appears that Catherine was also a little coy about deliberately giving it to herself. She told me she had decided to have it administered by some one else. The stuff was the same

color as her sleeping powder. That's one reason she chose it. Following her instructions, I had had it put up in the same size packages. Indeed, with that attention to detail that has always characterized me in important matters, I took a package of the sleeping powder with me as an inspiration to the chemist who put it up. No one, looking at the two, could have told the difference, inside or outside.

When I got to Catherine's room I dropped the two powders on the nurses' table. Each contained half a dose and they were to be taken several hours apart. She watched me do it and grinned that monkey-like grin of hers—the grin which suggested that she and life were sharing some cute little secret. That grin always got on my nerves, and it did that night. I bade her a restrained farewell, took my money, and faded out into the world, leaving the rest to chance. Evidently the fair and unsuspecting Miss Connolly gave her both powders that night, for Catherine died four days later, which is the regulation time for the dose's final effect.

If this supplying of a vital need seems improper to a person of your conventional standards, let me add that I consider I did a work of mercy. The old girl would have gone through hell in the next year and she knew it. But if you feel that here or hereafter I deserve punishment for that action, it may comfort you to know I got it right here. Catherine gave me a thousand dollars for the little errand—not enough, of course, but all I could screw her up to, and the least I had to have for my expedition to South America. She haggled so much and became so irritated and showed her dislike of me so plainly that I thought it best not to press the point too far. She paid me on delivery, as I've said, and you will probably utter one

of your damned sardonic chuckles when you hear what happened to the money. Naomi caught me counting it the next morning (I needn't go into details) and got on to the whole situation. She extorted the money from me, with young Price's help, and returned it to Catherine. She also went to Miss Connolly and hauled her over the coals. Miss Connolly told her that both the powders had "disappeared" during the night. But of course she lied.

So there I was, without my hard-earned cash. How sharper than a serpent's tooth is an ungrateful daughter! And you can imagine the time I had with Naomi after Catherine died! No wonder I so ardently welcomed your visit and your plan.

If there's any trouble about the episode and the little Connolly gets into it, you can clear her by showing this letter. The law will have a pretty chase trying to put salt on my tail when I've all South America to play about in.

That's all I need to say, I think, except that I am
Yours for occasional truth and justice
(if the damned things aren't overdone)

HARRY SABIN.

Long read Harry Sabin's letter twice, and very slowly. Then he packed a small bag, put on his coat and hat, and slipped downstairs. He found the admirable Johnson preparing to lock up for the night, and in any other mood would have admired the skill with which the butler concealed his surprise at seeing him.

"Johnson," Long said abruptly, "I'm going away for a few days."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell Miss Webb about it to-morrow, and say to all the rest, and to Doctor Cary if he calls up, that I'll be back Sunday night."

"Yes, sir. Good night. A pleasant trip, sir."

Long, who had been crossing the threshold of the big front door, stopped and looked at Johnson, from whose pale eyes humble admiration beamed. The response of Johnson's ideal temporarily dimmed that gentle glow.

"A hell of a pleasant trip I'll have," Long growled, and closed the door.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST MESSAGE

LONG spent the next three days at the Country Club, playing golf with red balls on a snow-covered links. One or two friends, casually arriving for the week-end, offered to join him Saturday and Sunday mornings, but he discouraged them. The course, he truthfully asserted, was appalling. He himself was doing the stunt for exercise. His liver needed stirring up and he'd a touch of insomnia.

It was rather pleasant out in the open, playing against his own record, under gray skies with a flurry of snow in the air; a silent, tough-fibered little caddy his sole companion. On the late afternoon of the second day the caddy mentioned his lifelong ambition to be a lawyer, and Long looked at him for the first time. Heretofore the caddy had been merely an object that moved briskly after balls. They talked a little between Long's subsequent shots. The boy showed himself bright and likable.

"Come to my office in town," Long said when he was overpaying the lad Sunday afternoon. "I've always thought I'd give some boy an education, if I found the right one. I may give you a trial, but you'll have to convince me that you're in dead earnest and up to the opportunity."

The boy came and eventually convinced him. That week-end of golf was a good thing for Jimmy Carington. It was also a good thing for Long. He returned to the Chandler house Sunday night with clear eyes and steady nerves; but he took care to be too late for dinner. Before he went upstairs he plucked Miss Webb out of the living-room and escorted her to the library.

"It's high time," she reproached him. "How about that appointment we had the day after you left?"

"I'm keeping it now. No doubt Catherine told you in her monologue that I'd got Miss Sabin's father out of the country," he began briskly.

"Yes."

"All right. Then you're ready for this." He handed her Sabin's letter and watched her while she read it, saw her face slowly whiten.

"Then I did it!" she groaned. "As soon as I got back that night I gave Miss Chandler a powder she said Miss Connolly had left ready on her medicine table."

"No, we both did it. You see," he summed up, "she sent for me and I was there that night. I didn't speak of the visit because it was her affair and mine. She wrote to me that she was running short of cash and asked me to bring her some, but I think she merely wanted to see me, and I certainly wanted to see her. During our talk, which was short, for I realized that she was very tired, she said Miss Connolly had forgotten her powder and she asked me to give her one.

She told me where it was—on the medicine table on the other side of the room.

"I went over and found two powders lying there, and I gave her one of them. I never thought of the matter again till this infernal question came up, and not much even then, till you spoke of the poison taking four or five days to work. But the facts are that I gave her one powder and you gave her the other. According to Sabin's letter, the two powders together made a full dose. It will certainly show up in a post mortem."

"We both did it," she echoed in a whisper. Their eyes met and held for a speechless moment. At last she said in a low voice: "I've been blaming myself, anyway, ever since I learned that she had been trying to get poison. You see—" she hesitated, then brought out the words with difficulty—"I myself told her about the special poison I think was used."

"You told her . . ."

"Yes, three months ago, in one of our conversations. She liked to talk and be talked to when she felt well, so I told her about that poison case of mine, knowing it would interest her. It was rather dramatic. She was interested, too. She asked the name of the poison and all about its action. I didn't think any more about it then. But since—I can't talk about it," she broke off. "I can't take it in."

"Nor I, but I've sent for Mrs. Mason again and we'll know a lot more to-morrow night than we do now."

He watched her make her way to the door, fumble

for the knob, and get out of the room. He knew exactly how she felt. . . .

He had slept fairly well at the Country Club. That night he didn't sleep at all, though his brain assured him with gratifying clearness that he had nothing for which to reproach himself. He had lost most of the good effects of his Country Club visit when Monday morning at ten o'clock he again received Doctor and Mrs. Warren Mason in his office.

"I did keep something back, Mr. Long," was the bride's greeting. "Before we got your message my husband said I must come and tell you about it. He's afraid—"

"I've begun to catch on to the fact that my wife's involved in something really unpleasant," said the young doctor, who looked as if he hadn't slept well, himself. "Up till now I've supposed it was just the errands Nellie ran and the money end that was worrying you. You see, she didn't tell me anything about this powder business till last night."

"I didn't think I ought to," his Nellie gulped. "Miss Chandler told me again and again I was never to mention Mr. Sabin's visits to anybody."

"We'll release you from that promise," the lawyer said dryly. "Just begin from the moment Sabin left and tell me . . ." He stopped, thought an instant, and shot a question at her so suddenly that she jumped: "Did you give Miss Chandler one of the powders he brought her?"

"I'll tell the world I didn't!" Mrs. Warren Mason said indignantly. "I took the pair of dirty things to the bathroom and dropped them into the vault."

"You—what?" Long almost shouted the question.

"That's what I did," Mrs. Mason repeated, rather overwhelmed by his vehemence.

"Tell me every detail," Long said in a voice that was not so steady as usual.

"Well, it was this way: When I got Mr. Sabin upstairs and came back into the room to tell Miss Chandler you had come, I noticed two powders lying on her medicine table. I never left medicine lying around that way, and neither did Miss Webb, so I said to Miss Chandler, 'What are these things?' She looked at them a minute with a queer expression—they were on a table across the room from her—and then she said in her sarcastic way, 'They would seem to be my sleeping powders.'

"There wasn't any reason why I should suspect anything, and I didn't when I asked my next question. But I couldn't understand how they had got there, so I said, 'Did Miss Webb leave them out for you?' Miss Chandler didn't answer and I thought she hadn't heard, so I asked the question again and she said, 'No,' very crossly. That left only Mr. Sabin to do it, for Nora hadn't been in the room at all; and, besides, she had the strictest orders never to touch the medicine. I said, 'Did Mr. Sabin leave them?' And when she said, 'Yes,' I asked if he had given her a powder."

"Tell the exact words you used, please; and hers, too."

"All right, Mr. Long. I said, 'Mr. Sabin had no right messing among our medicines. Did he give you a powder?' and she said, with a queer little laugh, 'Oh, no, he didn't go as far as that.'"

"I was tired and annoyed to think I had to leave her again and drive Mr. Sabin back to the chicken farm. He had made me very angry on the way to Miss Chandler's. I suppose I was just in the mood to make a fuss about little things, and anyway I wouldn't dream of giving a patient medicine some visitor had got out of the case. I wouldn't feel sure it was the right kind. A lot of her powders looked just the same. So I said, 'If he's been handling these, I'll get you some fresh ones,' and I picked them up to drop them in the fire.

"I don't know whether you ever noticed Mr. Sabin's hands," the speaker broke off to say. "They're not a bit like the rest of him. They're all calloused, and the nails are broken, and both times I saw him they weren't very clean. He told me he had spoiled his hands by doing a lot of outdoor work for his health. I didn't like to handle anything he had touched. But when I took up the powders, Miss Chandler spoke very quickly and sharply. She said: 'Let those alone! Leave them exactly where they are.' Naturally I was surprised and dropped the powders on the table again. Then I looked at her closely and I saw she was excited.

"So I dropped the matter of the powders and propped her up to receive you, and she shut her eyes and kept them shut so long I almost thought she was asleep. Just as I was leaving the room to get you I noticed those powders again. Her eyes were still closed. So I got two fresh powders out of the box in the medicine closet and put them on the table, and I tucked the others in my apron pocket. It didn't take a minute.

"When I turned toward Miss Chandler her eyes were open, but she wasn't looking at me. She was staring straight before her and I was off at one side. I'm not sure she hadn't seen what I was doing, for my back was toward her. But anyway, she didn't speak of it. I went into the bathroom and dropped the two powders Mr. Sabin had handed down into the vault. I simply wanted to get rid of them because he had fingered them, and because I had no idea of giving them to my patient without being sure what they were. I'd have dropped them into the fire as I meant to in the first place, but they'd have flamed up and she might have noticed it. So I disposed of them the other way."

"When did you suspect that there was anything wrong about them?"

"When Miss Naomi came to see me the next morning. It was very early and I had just gone off duty, so I saw her in the library. She was so unkind and so excited that I didn't give her any satisfaction. She said her father had admitted that he left some medicine, and I said he'd left two powders and they had disappeared during the night. Miss Naomi seemed al-

most crazy. She said if Miss Chandler had taken them, and they hurt her, I'd be responsible. That made me angry, but it didn't worry me, for I knew Miss Chandler hadn't taken them."

"You didn't see fit to reassure Miss Sabin?"

"No, I didn't. I'm ashamed of it now. But she and her father had got on my nerves and she was horribly rude to me. I've meant ever since to tell her, but I hated to bring the matter up again. Miss Sabin saw Miss Webb, too, after she saw me; but I could tell by Miss Webb's manner that Miss Sabin hadn't said anything to startle her."

"Did Miss Chandler say anything more that night, before I came into the room?"

"Yes. She put her hand on mine when I was taking her pulse, and she said, 'You're a good little thing, Nellie.' She spoke in a very tired way. Then she said: 'I'm not so well. I begin to think God is going to be merciful to me and let me off sooner than I dared to hope. But perhaps Nicholas will brace me up. Send him right in.' "

"What else happened that night?"

"Nothing special. I put Nora in charge of Miss Chandler and took Mr. Sabin back to the farm. Nora said Miss Chandler slept every minute that I was gone. When I got back she was still asleep. Then Miss Webb got home and came into the room, and Miss Chandler woke and was very restless. She wanted to talk, but Miss Webb gave her the powder that was ready. There

was only one left. I remember Miss Chandler told me you had given her the first one."

"I did," Long said simply. He added Miss Chandler's tribute to the "blind little bat" before him. "I'm beginning to think you *are* 'a good little thing,' Mrs. Mason," he said. "But I shall not be sure till I hear from Doctor Cary."

"Here! Just what do you mean by that?" the bridegroom demanded.

"I mean that I'm beginning to think your wife is a good sort. A little too fond of money and not very considerate of Miss Sabin, and not exactly the nurse I'd choose in a crisis. But as a human being she seems well-meaning and subject to flashes of inspiration. I hope to be convinced of this before the day is over."

It was not the moment for one of young Mrs. Mason's flashes. She looked uncomprehending and disturbed. Her husband's brain worked faster.

"I see," he said slowly. His good-looking face paled. "You mean you're having a p.m.?"

Long nodded.

"When will you know the result?"

"Some time to-day, I hope. But don't worry," Long added kindly. "If she has told the whole truth *this time*, she has nothing to fear."

"Mr. Long, will you telephone us the result of that autopsy as soon as you know it?"

With understanding eyes Long looked at the bridegroom.

"I hope I'll be able to," he said gently; and the newly wed pair had to let it go at that.

"We'll sit beside the telephone till we hear from you," the husband announced.

Long was dismissing another client late that afternoon when the telephone bell on his desk rang briskly.

"I've been trying to get you all day," Cary's irascible voice assured him.

"All right. You've got me now."

"Will you be in your office another half-hour or so?"

"Yes. Coming over?"

"Right away."

Cary was there in fifteen minutes. He wore the expression of an injured man.

"I wanted to give you the result of that fool autopsy," he began while they were shaking hands.

"Yes?"

"There wasn't a damn thing wrong," Cary said disgustedly. "It was a mare's nest, just as I told you it was when you began all this fussing."

"Well, you didn't want to find anything wrong, did you?" The lawyer spoke so jubilantly that the doctor softened a trifle.

"Of course I didn't. But I didn't want all this extra trouble, either. Say, what the devil started Miss Webb off, anyway?"

"Light one of these cigars and settle back com-

fortably, and I'll tell you the whole story. I hope you're not in a hurry. It's quite a long one."

He told it while Cary listened in almost unbroken silence.

"I've got a question for you," Long warned the doctor when he had finished. "Now that we know there was no poisoning, will you tell me why Catherine Chandler died just at the time Sabin's poison would have killed her, if she had taken it, and why she had the symptoms it would have caused?"

"That's easy," Cary said. "The time may have been merely a matter of coincidence. She had worn herself out with all her investigations and experiments, and she collapsed long before she needed to if she had taken care of herself. The symptoms were those of her own disease—the same symptoms appear in a dozen diseases—but there may have been suggestion in them, too. She was hipped and scared, and no wonder. For in my opinion," he deliberately added, "she really meant to take the poison Sabin brought her."

"You really think that, Doctor? It's what I'm afraid of, too."

"I'm pretty sure of it. Why should she want to experiment on Sabin? She knew he was hound enough to do anything. And if she wasn't using him, why didn't she hustle him out of the country?"

"Those are the arguments that convince me."

"They're practically unanswerable," Cary declared. "They account for her fear, too. She wouldn't have

been afraid any one would give her poison without her knowledge. She knew no one could put that over. She was trying to whip herself up to the job, and it hung over her like a nightmare. The nightmare of dying of her disease and taking another year or so to it was even worse, and she was facing them both and trying to make her ghastly choice. No wonder she wanted to divert her mind," he ended with a sympathy that surprised the listener. "I don't blame her for anything she did."

"Neither do I, if we're right. Then," Long went on reflectively, "she either opened her eyes and saw Miss Connolly change those powders, and she lost her nerve and let her do it, or . . ."

"Or she didn't see it. She had nerve enough to stop it the first time, you know. If she didn't see the second effort, she really thought, when you and the Webb girl dosed her, that she was taking poison. In that case, and in her condition, suggestion might easily have caused her death."

"We'll never be quite sure which it was," Long mused aloud.

"We'll never be certain," Cary agreed. "But we do know she didn't die of poisoning, and that's all that concerns us." The old doctor got to his feet rheumatically.

"I'll send you the official report," he promised. "Then, for God's sake, don't let me hear any more about the Chandler case. You actually had me going for a week. Hereafter, that business is a closed issue."

"It's the most closed issue I know of," Long cheerfully agreed.

Almost before the door closed behind Cary, Long was telephoning Doctor Warren Mason the result of the post mortem. It was pleasant to pass on his news to a more responsive ear than Cary's, and he could find no fault with its reception by the enthusiastic bridegroom.

After that interview with Cary, Long received with unruffled calm the message Miss Webb gave him when he reached the house at half-past five. She had waylaid him in the living-room and drawn him at once into the library. He followed her with an almost jaunty air, but he sobered when he sat down beside her and took in at close range her strained expression and the dark circles under her eyes. The song of the Troubadour floated down to them from George's sitting-room.

"I've something more to tell you," Hope began, and a little chill slithered down the hearer's back. Nothing she could say could disturb him now, he assured himself, but there had never been anything especially agreeable following that preface in that house. He wondered whether he ought to divert the speaker by passing on to her at once the report from Cary. It would take a weight from her mind, poor girl. However, she gave him no time for this, but went on with her own recital.

"Miss Chandler told me four days before she died that she had a record made for you the afternoon she spent in the phonograph studio," she began.

"A record for me! But why didn't you—"

"Wait, please." Her air was professional again, and that air now irritated him because it seemed to put him at a distance. He could almost see her fading out, like a picture on the silver screen, and he had an impulse to draw her back. However, he waited.

"She said she had put a lot on your shoulders that she wasn't up to, herself, and that you were going to take it hard because you were a bachelor and had always lived alone, without responsibilities. She said you weren't used to personal contacts and duties of the kind you'd have to meet."

Long smiled wanly. "She was right about that."

"She said that if I saw you were going down under it, taking it too hard and that sort of thing, I was to put the record on and let her give you her last message. She said it might help you, but she left the time to my discretion."

Catherine Chandler's man of affairs looked at her.

"I could mention a number of occasions in the last fortnight when I needed help," he dryly observed.

"I know, and especially the other night, right after our talk. I ought to have given it to you then. In fact, I meant to. But she didn't want to let you off unless it was really hurting you. She said you were so indolent—" Long stiffened, then relaxed under a sudden twinkle in the brown eyes that were holding his—"so indolent," Miss Webb coolly repeated.

"I heard you the first time," her companion said coldly.

"So *indolent*," she wickedly emphasized, "that you might drop the whole thing if you got the message too soon. And there were certain things she had set her heart on having you do. She said if you once really got your teeth into the job, you'd finish it; the danger lay in your dropping it before you felt interested. I suppose I exceeded my authority," Miss Webb calmly added, "but that's really why I told you I thought she was poisoned. I knew that would wake you up and make you go at the whole problem in earnest."

"Are you telling me," Long said slowly, "that you *didn't* think then that she *was* poisoned?"

"No, I'm not telling you that. I did suspect that she was. Such queer things were going on, and so many unbalanced persons would profit by her death, that I was suspecting all sorts of things. I knew something was wrong. I didn't know what. I thought it might be that. But it was only a suspicion, and Doctor Cary's attitude would have kept me from reporting it to you or to any one else if I hadn't been sure that to tell you would help Miss Chandler's plan. You see how right I was," she ended with a heavy sigh. And again he seemed to see her fading out, taking herself and her troubles away from him. "The record is there and it's all set," she said. "You'd better come to her room and hear it."

Long followed her upstairs with mixed feelings. He knew she was unhappy, and he was sorry, but there would be plenty of time later on to tell her of Cary's report. A little longer tension wouldn't do her much

harm. He himself had gone through days of it, because of her and her suspicions. Vague notions of taming her flitted through his mind. She'd need some discipline from the man who married her. He looked at the slender, erect body preceding him up the staircase, and suddenly his heart shook. He knew now what was the matter with him. His mind had been too confused to take in the knowledge sooner. Resentment against her died in him.

She let him into the formidable room, flashed on the electric lights, and drew an easy-chair close to the big phonograph standing at the right of the door. But he shook his head, trying to pull his thoughts from her to the duty before him.

"I'll take this exactly the way the youngsters got it," he announced; "darkness, chaise longue, and all the rest of it. I want to see what the effect was."

"Then will you have your man Stevens come down and hide in the closet and breathe adenoidally while you're listening?" she ironically inquired.

For a moment his new-born passion experienced a chill. This seemed like criticism. Then he chuckled.

"So you discovered that?"

"Of course I discovered it, after the second session," she said almost scornfully. "I suppose he's really a detective, too, and not your servant at all."

"That's what he is," the lawyer cheerfully admitted. "I sent Stevens to Scotland for a visit, and took this man on to help me in the little job before us. If Catherine engaged a detective, I didn't see why I shouldn't.

The bright idea of listening to the records was his, and I didn't know anything about it till Naomi and Catherine told their experiences the second night. Then I caught on and I stopped his listening in. Of course he wasn't trying to frighten the girls. He simply had a bad cold and was fighting off impulses to cough and sneeze. Aside from that little episode he has done pretty well. He's through now, and I'm letting him go to-morrow."

For the first time she seemed to take in the change in his manner—jubilation and something deeper. She looked at him closely, but she made no comment.

"Then you want the stage setting exactly as the others had it?"

"Just as they had it, thanks."

He pulled the chaise lounge into the center of the room as he spoke and settled himself into it. She cast a final look at the record and needle, made sure the phonograph was wound up, turned out the lights, and departed. He heard the initial purr of the needle on the record and the smile left his lips. A good stunt this. The youngsters must have got quite a thrill from it. The next instant he himself experienced a thrill as his old friend's deep, rich voice spoke to him out of the darkness.

"By this time you may be hating me, Nicholas," it began. "If you are, I can't blame you much, for I know I've knocked the placid routine of your life into a cocked hat. Even if you drop the whole thing now, the chances are that you'll never again be quite so op-

timistic and so self-satisfied and so ignorant of life. You've been all those things, my friend, though you don't know it, so this experience will do you good. But I can't claim any credit for that, and it was not my object when I put you up against the situation you're facing.

"I don't know how long you will have been on the job before Miss Webb gives you this message. Like most of us, she's a fool in some ways, but she's surprisingly clever in others. The trouble is, I never know which she's going to be at any given time."

Long's smile returned and lingered. He would see that Hope Webb got this without unnecessary delay.

"But I hope you will have accomplished something before you hear this record," Catherine Chandler's voice went on, "and that you will have worked up enough interest and impetus to keep on.

"You probably know by this time that my sister Anne and her daughter Lily are victims of the morphine habit and that Anne is beyond hope. I want Lily saved.

"You may know that the brute Sabin has escaped from prison, and that he is ruining Naomi's life as he ruined her mother's. He'll kill her before he gets through if he isn't sent back to prison or out of the country. He has not one redeeming quality.

"All the rest have; I've learned that. They have qualities I knew nothing about till these last weeks. My niece Catherine is a fine creature, the best of the lot. Naomi has courage, but she's hipped and bitter,

as I am. She'll follow in my footsteps if she isn't helped. See that no such grim fate overtakes her. George and Ethel are headed straight for the devil unless they're stopped. I've given them some stiff jolts, which I hope may do them good.

"But they all have bitter need of the thing they've never had since they were children, the companionship and affection of decent elders. It's the irony of fate that I, the one human being who could and should have given them this, whose duty it was to give it to them, failed them at every turn. I was gadding around the world in the years when they most needed me. I was absorbed in my own useless life and trivial interests. And since I came back I've been a wretched invalid, facing death, and equally worthless to myself and to others.

"Nicholas, the discovery of what these children have been up against has brought me to my senses. I've learned the truth too late to help them, myself, but not too late, I hope, to get help for them. I blame none of them but Anne for what they are. Perhaps neither you nor they will believe it, but of late something has stirred in me—a belated affection for them, a desperate concern, a hardening decision to make up for my past failures by giving them a fresh start. I can't do it myself, of course. I'm too weak, too shaken, too uneasy in the face of eternity, to accomplish much. But I'll work for them as long as I last; and, dear old friend, I'll leave the rest to you.

"Stand by them if you can, and as long as you can.

You can afford to give them as much time as you think they need; for my new will leaves you a small fortune and gives you everything else I possess, in trust for them, to be expended by you as executor and trustee and wholly at your discretion. You may now offer the will for probate any time you see fit. And if you will not, cannot serve me and them, I know you will find some one else, sane and wise and tested and tolerant, who will take your place. But, Nicholas, I shall die believing that you will stand by us.

"The end is not so far off as the chirping specialists think. If I had my old nerve, I'd keep on fighting. As it is, I can't. . . . Remember this, Nicholas: Whatever happens to me, there's to be no investigation, no discussion, no punishment. I, and I alone, am responsible for the manner of my life and my death.

"I have missed you these last weeks, but I dared not send for you. I'd have told you what I was doing, and you would have stopped it. I know you so well! I shall see you once again before I go. But I shan't have strength to say any of this when that time comes. Good-by."

She had not had strength to say any of it then. She had sent for him and had been glad to see him, and she had asked almost at once for her powder and had then lain quite still with her hand in his. That had been a new touch, that hand in his. She may have been sure then that she was dying. She had been sleeping when he slipped away. . . .

Miss Webb opened the outer door.

"Is it over?" she asked from the threshold.

He rose and took her hand. She flushed and looked startled. For a moment the hand fluttered uncertainly in his, then lay quiet.

He led her into the room. "Yes, it's over. But I want you to start it again and sit with me and listen. I want you to hear it."

"In the darkness?"

"No, this time we'll have light."

He turned on the lights, pushed the chaise longue into a corner, and drew two easy-chairs near the phonograph.

"I'm going to have the children up here right now to hear that record," he announced after the last words had been repeated.

"It may help them," she agreed. Her eyes were wet and she wiped them defiantly. She had utterly ignored the back-hand tribute from the patient she had loved. That was big of her, and he was ashamed of the frivolous and petty feeling that had made him smile over it. "They've had all their own records now. She left only one for each of them," Hope went on. "But her instructions were that the records are to be repeated sometimes if it seems advisable. . . ."

She spoke depressedly and he knew what was in her mind.

"I've got something to tell you," he said; and watched the light and life come back into her face as he repeated Mrs. Warren Mason's final confidence and Doctor Cary's report.

The "children" heard the last record. When Miss Chandler's voice was silent again, Long gave them a little talk, which he prefaced by repeating Mrs. Mason's recital and Cary's report. The nurse's story he edited, saying merely that she had destroyed the two powders because she was not sure where they had come from, as neither she nor Miss Webb left medicine lying about.

Catherine Chandler, the post mortem proved, had died of her disease and not of poison.

"I shall carry out her wishes," he said, "and I shall begin at once, since she empowered me to do that. I'll open the will to-morrow and submit it for probate. We'll remain here six months, as she wished. After that we'll decide on the next step. The bulk of her money is yours, but you won't get much of it till her purpose is achieved. In the meantime, from now on, each of you will be put on an allowance liberal enough for reasonable needs; and that allowance will continue as long as you keep the good resolutions you have made.

"If you lapse," he went on evenly, "the income will be cut down to meet your bare necessities. I don't want to hold any threat over you; but I know there is a fight before you, and I'm laying all my cards on the table so that you can make that fight in full knowledge of all it means. On one hand lies the prospect of a decent, self-respecting, helpful, comfortable, and luxurious life—a life of work, diversions, travel, and all sorts of healthful interests. On the other lies utter

destruction of body and soul for some of you. If the vices you have formed seem more precious to you than the decent things of life, I suppose you'll cling to them. But you've shown me there's enough good in you to make you want to throw them off, and any one who makes the effort will have me with him or her from start to finish.

"As fast as I'm convinced of your good faith and continued determination to make yourselves what you should be, I'll raise your incomes. I'll finance any sound enterprises you want to go in for. I'll stand back of you like a father. And," his smile flashed out at them, "it's going to be a labor of love. I find I rather like being a family man.

"One thing more," he added, his eyes on the faces before him. "I'm going to ask you to keep all Miss Chandler's rules for the coming six months, and most especially the midnight curfew rule. We want to get a good running start on this new life we're planning, and your aunt's suggestions can't be bettered."

Henry Hutchins got slowly to his feet. He had lost his usual assurance. Naomi had refused him that afternoon, but she had done it so kindly and gratefully that he was almost happy. He sent a deprecating smile over the assemblage.

"No one has asked me to speak for this gang," he said, "but I'm going to, just the same, for I'm sure I know how we all feel. We're so happy over the end of that hideous suspicion of us that we'd do anything; and the next best thing to that, Uncle Nicho-

las, is the knowledge that we're in your hands. We all know we're safe there."

There was an outburst of applause, suddenly and self-consciously checked as the members of the group remembered where they were. They glanced toward the empty chaise longue beside the window and then, as if they had gained assurance from the memory of the figure that had lain in it so long, the applause broke out again.

"All right," Long said hastily. "We're going to make a success of this. Now let's go down to dinner."

As they filed out into the upper hall he touched the arm of the Troubadour, whom he had invited to the meeting. The lad dropped behind the rest.

"Dick," Long said in a low tone, "they tell me at the hospital that there's no chance of Mrs. Price's coming back to us. In fact, her troubles are almost over. Why not send your traps here to-morrow if Catherine approves?—as I'm sure she will. There's no reason why you and Lily shouldn't have that room."

"That's awfully good of you, sir." The Troubadour's eyes shone. "It will mean a lot to us."

All the eyes around Long were shining eyes—even Naomi's, even George's, even Lily's. Of course such exaltation couldn't last. He had no illusions as to the nature of the long, hard fight before him. But he was not afraid. Hope Webb would help him. So would the Troubadour and Naomi and Henry Hutchins and Catherine Price. He could count on each of them. But it was the thought of the red-haired nurse

that helped him most. He heard her voice at his side.

"How does it feel to be so suddenly made the father of six?" she smilingly asked him as they followed the others downstairs.

"It feels fine," Long complacently assured her. "I've always suspected that I had a hidden gift that way! But you'll soon know all about how it feels. You've got to be a parent, too."

She shook her head. "I haven't the tact, or the wisdom, or the understanding."

"You'll get them all," he told her with sudden seriousness. "So shall I. The youngsters aren't the only ones who will be made over by this experiment. We're in for a nerve-racking, back-breaking, heart-aching, down-again-up-again-and-take-another six months. The fight will show the stuff we're made of. Are we ready for it?"

"I've never faced a job with such enthusiasm," she told him.

As the two entered the dining-room the young folks were circling to their places, each bowing in turn to the empty chair of the hostess. For several days the salute had been hurried and perfunctory. To-night there was eloquence in it; so much eloquence, indeed, that George Dixon felt called upon to break the emotional tension.

"For she's a jolly good fellow," he began at the top of his voice. The others, led by the Troubadour, stopped short, took up the refrain, and sang it standing. The room rang, the windows rattled.

Long cast an apprehensive look at Miss Webb.

"They've got to let off steam," he told her in a low voice. "She wouldn't mind."

"She'd love it," said Hope Webb.

It was her first big step along the new road of understanding.

CHAPTER XVII

SIX MONTHS LATER

AT half-past five o'clock on the afternoon of a warm day in late May, four of the wards of Mr. Nicholas Long were playing tennis on their new court in the rear grounds of the Chandler house. The game, played by George Dixon and Lily Price against Ethel Dixon and Henry Hutchins, had been exciting enough to draw and hold a "gallery" made up of Long and Miss Webb, Naomi Sabin, Catherine Price, and the Troubadour.

These observers, having encouraged both sides with fine impartiality, were now privileged to follow a spectacular finish in which young Dixon, leaping into the air with the grace of a Nijinski, sent his sister's ball back over the net, missed her head by a neat margin, laid the ball on the ground just behind her, where it eluded her frantic racket, and won the set.

"And let that be a lesson to you!" he advised Ethel as he mopped his moist brow and bent to retrieve his blazer from the grass where he had thrown it half an hour earlier. "A long-drawn battle," he continued. "But of course Lil and I won out, as any intelligent bystander would have seen we'd do, from the first."

"I thought Ethel and Henry were going to win,"

Hope Webb said with a sympathetic glance at the perishing losers.

"My remark stands," George announced, and grinned at her affectionately. "Any tea in the offing?"

"Johnson will bring it out to the garden in fifteen minutes."

"Three rousing cheers! As a rising young broker who sold more bonds to-day than Bryce did, I feel that I've earned it."

"Is George still going strong?" Long detained the Troubadour with a gesture and asked the question as the tennis-players raced toward the house for shower-baths before tea.

"Oh, yes, sir." The Troubadour, who had been about to join Catherine and Naomi, fell back beside the older man and Long's arm swung across his companion's shoulder in an accustomed manner as they walked on together.

"The firm took him as a favor to me," Bryce continued, "and I know they didn't think he'd last a month, as I told you at the time. But he's making good, all right. The job interests him, too. It keeps him out of the office and gives him a lot of variety. He actually made a sale to old Simonds to-day, and Simonds is about the hardest proposition in town."

The tennis-players disappeared into the house. Long took his arm from the young man's broad shoulder and gave him a friendly push.

"All right," he said. "Trot along to the girls. I want a few words with Miss Webb."

As the Troubadour swung ahead, Long returned to the nurse, who had dropped down on a rustic seat and was surveying a sunset with approval.

"Take your eyes off that and look at something worth while," he invited, indicating Catherine and Naomi and the two young men. He sat down beside her, and removing his hat let the evening breeze stir his hair, which had whitened perceptibly during the last six months.

"I like to watch them all," he complacently admitted. "And I'll offer a large and handsome prize to any one who can show me anywhere a better-looking, clearer-eyed, nicer-mannered family than mine."

"I suppose you don't realize it," his companion murmured, "but you're getting fatuous about those youngsters."

"I'm nothing of the sort; and anyway you're as obsessed by them as I am."

"I don't think of much else, but I'm not foolish. I'd scorn to be. You should have heard me calling George down this morning for the way he leaves his sitting-room."

"I saw him pick you up and carry you out of it," Long smiled. He spoke lightly, but his eyes were tired and there were new lines around his mouth.

"They don't treat either of us with proper respect," Hope muttered, maternal eyes on George.

"Perhaps not, but they're fond of us."

"Do you know," she said with sudden seriousness, "I'm really beginning to believe they are, in their vari-

ous ways. I couldn't be sure of it for months, but lately . . ."

"And you're crazy about them, and you show it every time one of them comes near you."

"I'm fond of them, though the Prices and Dixons make me furious every day of my life with their noise and carelessness and forgetfulness—"

"You take trifles like that too seriously. But you're patience itself about the things that count. I wish I could tell you what a miracle-worker you've been all winter." His gaze dwelt on her. "You're showing the strain, though. You haven't the color you used to have."

"I haven't always been as patient as I've seemed." She ignored the matter of the color. "And the nights of sleep I've lost!" she added.

"You've taken it too hard," he repeated.

"No harder than you have. Your hair has grown white since the holidays, and you look positively haggard."

He sighed. "I suppose I'm hypercritical, but that doesn't strike me as a tactful remark from a lady to the admirably preserved middle-aged man she's going to marry."

"Mr. Long, why do you keep harping on that subject?"

"Because it's the only subject except the children that interests me, and we can't talk about them *all* the time. And my name is Nicholas when we're alone

together; a beautiful name, when one comes to think of it."

"We can talk of the children now," she said, ignoring his second sentence. "I want to talk about them. We haven't done it for a month. You've accused me of being fond of them," she went on, "and I am; and I've decided that being fond of them is the turn of the screw. As long as they were merely patients, in a way, it wasn't so hard. Now their capacity to make one suffer is appalling."

"I know; I feel that, too. But it's through our affection for them that we're getting hold of them. And the worst of the fight is over now, don't you think?" he tentatively advanced.

"I'm almost sure of it. The first three months I didn't dare to look a day ahead. Now I can face their future. But we're still in for a lot of setbacks and disappointments. We're sure to have them."

For a moment they sat silent, their ears open to the sound of battle in the years to come. Then Long spoke thoughtfully, his eyes on Bryce and the two girls, waiting at the tea-table in the garden.

"You talk as if the experiment were still going on. But the six months are up to-day. What's your notion of the next step?"

"That's for you to decide, of course; and you can't convince me that you haven't decided already!"

"Just the same, I'd like your ideas. Give me a sort of résumé of the situation as you see it."

She sighed wearily. "I'll assume an expression of extreme intelligence and go through the mockery of telling you what you know as well as I do. It's easy enough. Everywhere I look I see imaginary charts, *their* charts. I haven't thought of anything else for six months, and I can't now."

"Of course you can't. Neither can I. If we could, we wouldn't be putting the job over as I think we're doing. But go ahead. Read their future."

"Lily's case, of course, seemed the hardest," Hope began. "But she was the quickest to respond and she's the one I'm surest of now."

"I feel that, too."

"Her mother's death was a terrible lesson, and of course it removes the poor child's greatest temptation. If Mrs. Price had lived, I don't think we could have pulled Lily through. As it is, Dick and Catherine have done more for her than we have. There's a lad for you! And *how* I disliked him in the beginning!"

"So did I."

"With Dick and Catherine standing by Lily," Hope went on, "I think she could safely go on without you, even now."

"Or without you?"

"Without either of us."

"I agree, so far."

"Naomi is very much softened, and she's got a different angle on life. We needn't worry about her any more. I used to think it was a good thing for George that she refused him. Their temperaments are

so different. Now . . . I don't know. Of course George and Ethel are the big problems."

"Of course."

"They like having a real home at last, as all the rest do, and comfort and affection and a family around them. They're doing better and better under those conditions. But neither of them is strong enough yet to stand alone or to hold the other up. If they drifted out into the world to-morrow, I believe that in six months or a year at the most they'd be back just where they were."

"I'm afraid that goes without saying. In short," Long smiled at her, "we've made a good beginning, but we've still got a long way to go. Incidentally, how about saving me? Can't you make up your mind to do that?"

"Oh, you!" She rose. "You're the least of my worries," she added as they started for the garden.

Johnson was crossing the lawn, chin high and moving with the dignity of a super-butler slightly handicapped by the weight of a heavy tray. Jennie, the parlor-maid, walked humbly in his wake, anxious eyes on the cakes she bore. The tennis-players, now cool and fresh and smooth of head, but still arguing fiercely over their late game, ended the procession. When the tea had been poured, Henry Hutchins held up his cup.

"I'm going to offer a toast," he began, "and I actually don't believe any one but myself has remembered the vital anniversary I'm toasting. Let's drink to six months ago to-day!"

He raised the cup with a triumphant flourish, and lowered it again, looking sheepish. All the others wore the pained but patient expression of well-bred persons who have witnessed a faux pas. Ethel spoke resentfully.

"If that isn't just like you, Henry," she complained. "Every blessed one of us has been trying to make Uncle Nick and Miss Webb forget the date. Do you suppose we want to be thrown out into the world tomorrow? You've spoiled everything," she ended, and gloomily bit into a hermit cooky.

Long looked at the circle of suddenly serious faces around him, and his heart swelled under a new emotion. Those youngsters were actually afraid he was going to let them down!

"It seems reasonably clear," he observed, "that you haven't been counting the hours till you could escape."

No one answered. The Troubadour, who was taking bites of a piece of raisin cake alternately with Lily, looked as if he meant to, but changed his mind. At last Catherine said in a low voice:

"You aren't really going to kick us out, are you, Uncle Nick?"

The head of the family laughed, but something in the atmosphere sobered him. He remembered that up till this year not one of these young things had known what it was to have a real home. In this hour they feared they were to lose it.

"Children," he began, matter-of-factly, "of course I haven't forgotten the date. It's my job to remember

this anniversary, and I may as well admit that I've been giving it a lot of thought."

He stopped, with a repetition of that odd sensation around his heart. His audience, he realized, was holding its breath. With his characteristic dislike of sentiment, George Dixon tried to meet the tense moment and failed.

"Three rousing cheers," he said in a tone that was meant to be jocund and was merely hollow.

"I think," Long went on, "that this old house is a pretty good place for a family. Anyway, I like it. So I'm going to keep it open and running exactly as it is, if Miss Webb and Johnson will stand by, for another six months at least and probably for a year, as headquarters for us all."

He stopped to enjoy a big moment. The circle of young faces seemed to flash into flame. Lips parted, but he raised his hand.

"There won't be any more rules and regulations," he continued. "You've all been pretty good about keeping those Miss Chandler made, but hereafter we'll come and go as we please. I want you to know that I trust you, and I'm doing this so you can show me my trust is justified. If any one wants to take an occasional week-end run to New York or Boston, or to the sea or the mountains, he or she may do it. Your incomes will be increased enough to make reasonable jaunts of that kind possible. I'd like to feel that you won't go for longer periods just yet, and I want to be sure that when you do leave you will come back.

I shall be here, and the more company I have, the better I'll like it. In fact, what I'm really hoping," he confessed, encouraged by the shining eyes around him, "is that you youngsters will consider this house your home until you marry."

Young Dixon rose and struck an attitude.

"I hope," he said solemnly, "that even Dick will have the sense to keep his mouth shut while I make a few remarks. Fortunately, every one but Dick and me is too overcome to speak," he went on, glancing around the tea-table. "So if you'll muzzle your spouse, Lily, I'll just mention that if Uncle Nick had tried to get us out, we'd all have clung tearfully to door-knobs, kicking Johnson fiercely on the shins every time he came to detach us.

"But the important thing I want to say, Uncle, is that your hospitality doesn't go quite far enough. I've just worried Naomi into promising to marry me next autumn if I keep to the strait and narrow path, and we're rather counting on throwing Henry out and staying on here till . . . well, till we need more than two rooms."

"Don't be absurd, George," Ethel said, literally. "Of course Henry won't give up a room here at home and go and live alone somewhere else."

Every one began to talk at once. Long, who was still standing, walked around the table, lifted Henry Hutchins to his feet with an impelling hand under his arm, and sat down beside Miss Webb.

"I'm changing places with you," he blithely assured young Hutchins after this maneuver.

"A fact even Henry might have grasped in time," George contributed.

"They owe the homyness of this place to you," Long told his co-worker in a low voice. "Why not marry me and be the boss of it, as I've been urging right along? Hope, you *know* I love you!"

"See how they're pairing off," she evaded, her eyes on the group excitedly talking around them. "In another year or two they'll all be married and scattered."

"Not scattered. Simply tucked away safely in homes of their own, as you and I shall be. How about it?"

"I don't know."

Long shook his head at her.

"You know perfectly well," he assured her. "You'd cling to a door-knob, yourself, and shriek if I tried to oust you."

"Oh, I'll stick to the job. But as to marrying you . . ."

"Of course I'm too old for you," he said soberly. "Otherwise it's the ideal arrangement. I adore you, but you need a strong hand, and I've got one under this velvet glove of mine. Let me see. I've proposed marriage to you seven—no, eight times before. Don't you feel up to it now," he ended anxiously, "for the sake of the children?"

"I might." That confession had turned her heart to water. Till to-day he had never mentioned the dif-

ference in their ages. "But not for the sake of the children," she added; and the color he had missed came back as she met his quick ecstatic look at her.

She was actually up to it at last. She had admitted that she was. And here were "the children" all around them! For once, that was annoying.



